

[illegible]

TowardTheStars

Chapter 1

*My feelings ran away
I didn't know how to feel them*

*'Cause I've got my love stuck in my head, in my head
I've got my love stuck in my thoughts, in my thoughts
I've got to keep my love in my heart*

Love Stuck, Mother Mother

Lily threw a pillow at Severus, which promptly bounced off his shoulder. Severus rolled his eyes as Lily pouted at him.

"I don't want to go," he said, crossing his arms. "A party with your boyfriend's drunk frat friends is not how I want to spend my Friday night."

"It's cause he'll be there, isn't it?" Lily asked, and Severus's grip tightened. "Yeah, it is, isn't it? C'mon, he's not that bad. And honestly, you can just avoid him. There'll be enough people there."

Severus set his gaze on Lily and shook his head. "He's a dick."

Lily shrugged. "Just spend your night with Remus. Or Reggie, I think he'll be there."

He sighed, slouching into the seat. "I can't understand how your boyfriend can deal with him."

"They're best friends, Sev. And Sirius is really nice. Just, you know, not to everyone." Lily paused. "Kind of like you," she added as an afterthought, and Severus grimaced.

"Please don't compare me to him. I couldn't stand the thought of us sharing any similarities." He pulled a face at the thought.

Lily huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, you're coming, Sev. It's James' party, and I want you to be there. And isn't it worse if you choose not to go because of him? Doesn't that mean he's won?"

"He hasn't won," Severus shot back quickly, and Lily looked skeptical.

"Okay, then come and prove it. You probably make him just as angry, so he'll hate to have you there too."

Severus grit his teeth and thought for a moment, eyebrows furrowing. Lily regarded him from across the bedroom and smiled softly. She knew she had him; she had had years to learn how to press his buttons and with something like this, she had him on lock.

"Fuck, fine," Severus growled. "I'll come to the stupid party."

Lily smiled brightly. "Perfect, now get over here. I want to watch the new season of *Grey's Anatomy*."

Severus stood and walked over to the bed. He hopped on and sat next to Lily, tapping his fingers against his thigh. He still looked deep in thought, so Lily sighed and pressed play.

She could remember exactly when Severus and Sirius had first met. It was September of their junior year, and one of those nights that held the dying breaths of summer.

James and she had been dating for about six months at this point, meeting in a Journalism class both had decided to take as a breadth. It was a small class – only about twenty students, and from the start, James had his eyes set on her. Her classmates used to tease her over it; James was a brother of a high-tier fraternity and nearly every girl was in love with him.

Lily had refused to buy into it, and months had passed with his increasingly desperate acts to get her on a date. When he didn't seem to be letting up, she finally conceded.

She had honestly expected him to be an asshole. President of one of the coolest frats, probably spoiled to all extremes and as arrogant as they come, she imagined a one and done deal.

But James had surprised her, and this first date had been spent with her in a mild state of pleased awe. His reputation had done him a disservice as he sent her into fits of laughter and moved her when she realized how truly caring he was. Their first date quickly turned into a second, and then a third, and by the time the semester ended, they had decided to be girlfriend and boyfriend, and Lily was pretty happy over it.

She still doubted it sometimes; in a sense, she was competing with the prettiest, coolest girls on campus, and for whatever reason, she had won. She had said that once to James, and he had laughed at it the way he does sometimes, bright with eyes shut, and said there was no one else he would rather be with. That he had tried one of those “cool” girls, and Lily was better in every which way possible.

Lily had kissed him at that, and James looked at her like she was the most important thing he had ever seen, and Lily decided that was when she really started to fall in love with him.

Their relationship had strengthened over the rest of the summer, and she practically glowed as she thought back over it. The love letters James had physically sent like the romantic idiot he is, her visit to his house i.e. mansion, and the countless kisses they had exchanged.

Returning to school had made it more difficult, and Lily thought sourly of all the girls who had taken it as a personal offense that a sorority-less pre-med nerd had somehow managed to have the one and only James Potter fall heads over heels in love with her. Lily didn't know how she had managed that either, and at one point, there were rumors of a love potion that sent Severus and her into hysterical laughter. James had only shrugged them off and remained insistent in his feelings to her.

“You're special, Lils. These girls – they're not, shit. They're not you. Not someone who I would spend the rest of my life with,” he had explained awkwardly one day, and Lily had to bite her tongue at that.

It was nice to be in love, she decided at that point, nice to be in love with someone like James Potter. And for all she could tell, James Potter seemed to feel the same about her.

Dating him also thrust her into his lifestyle, and her general hatred and disdain for frats only solidified. Individually, they were all great. Remus, especially, and to a lesser extent, Sirius and Peter, but nice all the same. The minute the four of them occupied the same space, let alone the rest of the brothers in KSE, chaos reigned.

Lily had decided at one party that they were all drunk, not just on alcohol, but also on their perceived self-importance. Sirius, the heir to some old-money family, was especially culpable of

that, arrogance reeking off of him, and Lily could only begrudgingly admit that, with the exception of James, he was the hottest person she had ever met. Fortunately, he was kind to her because he could just as quickly act as an asshole and a good one at that. She had seen how effective and cruel he could be to others, especially the girls who fawned over him. However, James' love granted her some protection, and Sirius seemed to approve of the relationship, constantly teasing James about it.

So of course, when Lily invited Severus to one of the parties, desperate for some actual company, they had taken an immediate hatred of each other.

Severus, like her, had a strong dislike of fraternities, and only with a lot of pleading had she managed to convince him. They had gone over early, privy to the exclusive pre-game that girls and boys would sell an arm to get into.

James and Severus had already met, and while it was initially uncomfortable ("C'mon, Lils, he's only your best friend from childhood? Are you sure he doesn't..." "James, shut up. It won't ever be like that, and I'm never abandoning him over you."), they had eventually come around. While friends would be a far stretch, they tolerated each other for Lily's sake, and even seemed to get along every so often.

At the pre-game, James had stepped up with a beer in hand and pulled Lily into a tight hug. He pulled away and kissed her, and Lily could taste the alcohol on his tongue. He then turned to Severus and shook his hand, and Severus had smiled back, muttering his thanks. James had pulled them onto the couch, pushing away three of the younger pledges. He handed them both beers and took a seat next to Lily, looping his arm around her shoulder.

Severus looked terribly out of place, his discomfort a physical presence. Surrounded by the campus's Adonises, his skinny frame and tight features strayed far from the standard of physical beauty the brothers were used to. Lily almost regretted bringing him, but then he did one of those remarkable Severus Snape things where he turned his discomfort into removed, calculated confidence and regarded the room with a weary maturity.

Lily squeezed his knee quickly, and Severus rolled his eyes at her, giving her a look that perfectly expressed what he thought of the brothers. Lily smiled and turned back to James who was shouting across the room at one of the pledges. She moved in closer to him, reveling in his energy and presence.

At one point, Sirius came over, face flushed and that lazy, infuriatingly hot, smile of his dripping off his face. He threw himself down next to Severus and stretched his arms over his head as he took in the scene. Severus sat rigidly next to him, holding his drink tightly.

Sirius then turned to Severus, eyes narrowing. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked, having to raise his voice over the ruckus of twenty drunk men and assorted girlfriends. Severus took a moment to respond as if he couldn't even be bothered.

"Severus. Lily's friend," he explained, glancing over at Lily who was laughing at something James said, her cheeks turning red from the alcohol.

Sirius huffed out a laugh, but it was cruel and immediately set Severus on the defensive. "You trying to fuck her?" he asked haughtily, his smile morphing into a smirk. Severus suppressed the urge to grit his teeth. Instead, he schooled his expression and looked at Sirius unimpressed.

"You trying to fuck him?" he shot back, his voice lowering and eyes conveying the slightest sense of disdain through a layer of apathy.

Something twitched on Sirius's face, and Severus knew he had won.

"I'm not a fucking fag," Sirius had spat. "Unlike you fucker."

Severus had smiled ever so slightly. "Takes one to know one, love," he said, voice curling over the last word in a way that would set Sirius's teeth on edge. This was almost too easy, and he enjoyed the opportunity to take down his ego. God, was he actually having fun at a frat party?

"Fuck you," Sirius had responded angrily. "Roberts, get me a drink," he barked, and the kid who must have been Roberts jumped up and ran to the kitchen. He was back within a few minutes and handed Sirius a glass of sprite. Severus figured it was vodka.

"You're friends with my brother, aren't you?" Sirius had said, voice still harsh as he took a swig of the drink.

Severus blinked and then decided to play dumb. He didn't need to add fuel to Sirius's ego, and by pretending not to know he was, when indeed most of, if not the entire, school did, well, he couldn't resist the opportunity. "Your brother?" he asked. Sirius turned to him and looked at Sirius as he was some lifeform that had just crawled out of the gutter.

"Regulus. Regulus Black"

"Oh, I didn't realize he was your brother. Yes, I am friends with him," Severus continued, arching an eyebrow. Sirius scowled.

"You're fucking annoying, aren't you?" he grumbled, taking another long drink. "Fuck off, will you?"

"I happened to be sitting here first," Severus countered, the idea that he should exercise caution stumbling behind his typical rashness. Sirius turned to look at him, and when their eyes met, Severus had to try very hard not to look away. He kept the gaze, however, determined not to lose to Sirius. He couldn't concede any victory to this asshole.

Sirius only broke away when a pretty dark-haired girl walked over, her hair bouncing over her shoulders. She was dressed in a red crop top and a tight jean skirt, and Severus averted his gaze.

"Siri," she exclaimed, her smile physically blinding.

"Bella," Sirius said, his voice losing the edge. Bella walked over and sat on Sirius's lap, her long, tan legs knocking against Severus's. She kissed him, and Sirius kissed back, long and deep. Severus shifted uncomfortably next to him, clenching the unopened drink tighter.

"Who's this, baby?" Bella said, her voice a pitch too high for Severus's liking. He figured he would have a headache after a few minutes of listening to her.

"No one," Sirius responded, kissing her again. Severus scoffed, loud enough for Sirius to hear, and turned to Lily. Lily at this point was properly drunk and looked at Severus with bright eyes. She looked between him and Sirius, who was making out with the Bella girl, and understanding crossed her face. She turned to the brother sitting next to James, a nice looking one with glasses and surprisingly without the standard sense of arrogance.

"Remus," she began, "Did I introduce you to my friend Severus? He's a Chemistry major, really smart."

"Pleasure to meet you," Remus responded, tilting forward to shake Severus's hand. "Chemistry,

huh?" he asked, and then Severus was talking with him and Sirius Black left quickly afterward and was forgotten for the rest of the night.

After that, Lily started to regularly invite Severus to the KSE parties, and since he usually had no better excuse, he tended to go.

James was always welcoming, Remus a compassionate conversationalist, and Peter was a good laugh. Sirius, however, had seemed to regard their first conversation as grounds for hatred and glared at Severus whenever he could. Every so often, the party drove them together, and their rare interactions resulted in acidic barbs and scathing insults.

No matter how stupid he wanted to consider Sirius, the man was incredibly effective at coming up with the most scathing, damaging response. People cowered before him as it only took a spare comment to cause a girl to hold back tears or a boy to clench his fists. Yet, regardless of what he said, people continued to worship him, the attention of every room drawing towards him like he was a brilliant star and they were measly asteroids. Severus has asked Lily about it, utterly confused at how anyone could continue to tolerate his presence, and she had said something about that smile of his, and how yes, he could be an asshole, but when he liked you there was nothing else in the world that mattered.

To put it simply, Severus thought they were all idiots.

Thankfully, Severus had as just as a sharp tongue and arguably even quicker wit, so he could effectively stand his ground and give as good as he got. They were worthy opponents, and if it wasn't for James and Lily to drag them apart when their hatred started to turn dangerous, Severus was certain one of them would have punched the other.

Sirius Black enraged him as few others could, and he figured the feeling was mutual.

Other than him, the other brothers were all fine and didn't pay much mind to Severus, too caught up in the alcohol and the hot sorority girls. Severus didn't mind himself. He would rather watch from the couch as the great drama of college parties played out before him.

He got to know the players, and frankly, as an anthropological experiment on the mindset of a standard frat boy, it provided enough intellectual stimulation to keep him engaged.

However, as most things tended to do, he did get overwhelmed and would walk outside, leaning against the back of the house and ignoring the smattering of boys who guarded the door. He lit a cigarette and would take slow drags, blowing out the smoke into the night. Hearing the dull pound of music behind him, the sound of girls entering and leaving in a flurry of activity, and the occasional passing car had a strangely calming effect on him, and he would spend a good amount of time there until it grew late and he became tired, and after shooting a quick text to Lily, he would leave.

Typically, people left him alone. He clearly didn't look like he belonged. The 'frat boy' had an image, and Severus's malnourished frame and unattractive features didn't fit that. Girls generally left him alone, a few asking for a smoke and even fewer striking up a conversation. Boys, not seeing how Severus could offer any social advantage, tried to seek out the cooler boys, flocking around the likes of James and Sirius. Severus didn't mind. The people didn't interest him, except for the occasional kindred soul who looked just as fed up as he was, and more so, he regarded their entitlement and bellicosity with disdain.

The KSE house was a den for Dionysius, but one that Severus didn't mind observing.

For the party tonight, Lily's pressuring won out, and Severus begrudgingly joined Lily yet again. He lost her quickly to James and snuck outside, tired of the heat and the drunk brothers who had reverted to a twelve-year-old's humor and a five-year-old's intelligence.

He stood outside, cigarette held loosely between his fingers. It had started to get cold as October drew to a close, but Severus didn't mind. Instead, he assumed his usual position, his eyes glancing upwards to catch the few stars that had forced their way through the light pollution.

He was jolted out of his reverie as a hand grabbed his shoulder, the person tilting forward to throw up all over Severus's shoes. He cursed and tried to push the person away, but the person held on tightly, dark hair falling over his face.

Sirius Black, he thought scathingly. "Get the fuck off me," he hissed, and Sirius did his best to stand up. He lifted his head, seemed to think better of it, and threw up again, this time gratefully missing Severus's shoes. "Fucking hell," he cursed again. "What the fuck, Black?"

Sirius mumbled something. He tried again, this time louder. "Sorry, shit. Sorry." He breathed deeply and rubbed his sleeve across his mouth. He removed his hand from Severus's shoulder and pressed it against the brick wall for support. "Did I get you?" he asked, still tilted forward.

Severus glanced down and grimaced. "Yes, you fucker. Seriously, what the fuck?"

"What? You never drink too much?" Sirius responded disgruntled.

"No."

Sirius scoffed. "You're full of shit, Snape."

"Unlike you and your idiotic friends, I don't drink, Black."

Sirius was quiet for a moment, seemingly taken aback. "You don't drink? Like at all? Do you even go to college?"

"Drinking is not a prerequisite for a degree," Severus shot back, and Sirius huffed out a laugh before wincing. He turned to press his back against the wall and managed to raise his head.

"Still, Snape, you ever have fun?" He breathed heavily and closed his eyes before quickly opening them. He cursed under his breath.

"You consider this fun, Black?" Severus asked, and Sirius huffed out another laugh.

"Yeah, until about five minutes ago."

"Then I pity you," Severus said, not entirely sure why. The frat culture disgusted him, and it's not like he ever wanted to waste one shred of empathy on someone as full of themselves as Sirius, especially since that person had just ruined one of his two pairs of shoes.

Sirius grew quiet at that, and they watched in silence as a flock of drunk girls shivered past them. "You're a weird one, Snape," Sirius finally said. "If you don't drink, then what the fuck do you do here?"

Severus shrugged, gripping the cigarette tightly. "I watch. I have a smoke. I talk with anyone intelligent enough to hold a sensible conversation, which is just as difficult to find as I had expected."

“Yeah, I bet you do,” Sirius mumbled, his eyes sliding shut. He tipped forward before correcting himself.

“Do you need help?” Severus offered, again unsure of why. It’s not like he cared.

Sirius thought for a moment, and then heaved. He winced again and wiped his mouth. “Yeah, fuck, some water? Or actually…” he slurred, and Severus waited for him to continue. “Help me upstairs? So I can lie down?”

Severus sighed. He had offered. “Fine, Black. Just don’t throw up on me again.”

“No promises,” Sirius said wryly, and Severus rolled his eyes. He looped Sirius’s arm around his shoulders and half-heaved him from the wall. Sirius was heavy, and he initially stumbled at the weight. He gritted his teeth and managed to navigate him back into the house. He pushed through the crowd of people, skin itching at the sweaty contact, and managed to half-drag Sirius upstairs.

He leaned against the wall at the top, shooting a nasty look at a couple that was blocking the hallway. The couple paled and quickly went downstairs. “What room?” Severus demanded, and Sirius stared at him blearily.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Severus said angrily. His shoulders were starting to ache from the weight of Sirius, and he didn’t want to deal with his stupidity.

“It’s not my house,” Sirius explained as if it was obvious. Severus suppressed the urge to yell.

“Fuck, fine. I’m going to leave you here and go get James, okay?” Sirius mumbled something, but Severus didn’t care because he had already gotten out from under Sirius’s arm and was half-way down the stairs. He stood on the third step, eyes scanning over the party as he searched for a flash of red hair. He desperately hoped he wouldn’t have to go down into the basement; he couldn’t stand the heat and the desperate pressing of bodies.

He eventually caught sight of her entering the room, and he made an immediate beeline to her, shoving past people who were too drunk to care. Lily caught sight of him and smiled as she leaned heavily against James.

“James,” Severus said, and James focused on him, eyes bright from the alcohol.

“Yeah?”

“Sirius Black is upstairs unable to walk or do much else except throw up. I suggest you go and help him or at least find someone who will.”

James nodded, seeming to sober up slightly. “Fuck, okay. I’ll go get Remus. Thanks for letting me know.” James turned away, and Lily leaned forward to hug him before following James. Severus stood there for a moment, before deciding it was time to go. He had had far too much for tonight and needed a new pair of shoes and a long, hot shower to wash away the night.

Chapter 2

Severus skipped the next party, even though it was Halloween and supposedly one of the greatest nights of the year. Instead, he picked up another shift at the library in order to afford new shoes and spent the following Saturday night with a few loners dutifully studying in the library.

That used to be him, he thought. If not for the efforts of Regulus and Lily that would still be him. He empathized with them and felt a shred of envy. Here, everything was ordered and safe. There were no frat boys to cause chaos and ruin your shoes.

However, it was considerably less exciting, and it didn't take Lily much time to convince him to come to KSE the following week.

After a rather nice discussion with Remus who grew passionate about politics after a few drinks, Severus slipped back outside. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, breathing deeply. He watched the door warily for Sirius but eventually relaxed. If Sirius threw up on him again, Severus would punch him as hard as he could, consequences be damned.

Distracted by his thoughts of how rewarding it would be to break Sirius's nose, he almost didn't notice the man approach him and wasn't able to suppress his flinch when he did.

"Get the fuck away from me," he muttered, scowling at Sirius. Sirius looked at him in distaste but fortunately didn't seem nearly as intoxicated.

"Fuck, Snape. I was just trying to apologize," Sirius responded, and Severus's scowl deepened.

"No need," he shot back and took another drag of his cigarette.

"Okay, then never mind. But here-," Sirius said, reaching into his pocket. "This should cover the pair of shoes I ruined." He handed Severus a bill, and Severus almost dropped it when he realized it was a hundred.

"I-Black," he said, unsure if he should take it. He had gotten those shoes for ten dollars at Goodwill. And a hundred was a lot of money, especially to him.

"Just take it," Sirius shrugged, sipping his drink, and Severus waited a moment before slipping it into his back pocket.

"Thanks," he mumbled. Sirius shrugged again and was about to turn to go back inside when he paused.

"Snape, you said," he began, rubbing his jaw. "Why don't you drink?"

Severus watched him a moment, and Sirius almost seemed abashed. But that was a ridiculous thought – Sirius Black was not bashful. "Why do you care?" Severus asked defensively, and Sirius shrugged again.

"Don't meet many people who don't. I'm curious," he said, and that note of arrogant apathy had crept back into his voice.

Severus took another drag of his cigarette. "I have alcoholism in my family," he said honestly, surprising himself. "Can't risk it."

Sirius nodded, "So the cigs? Lung cancer's also a thing, in case you didn't know."

It was Severus's turn to shrug. "At least I won't be hurting anyone else," he said, and Sirius blinked at that. Fuck, Severus thought. He hadn't meant to say so much. "Good enough reason for you?" he asked, needing the conversation to end.

Sirius nodded again. "Yeah, it is." He fell silent for a moment as if debating to say something else but eventually decided against it. "Anyway, fuck off," he said, and Severus huffed out a laugh at that and tried not to look too closely at Sirius's grin.

Sirius disappeared back into the house, and Severus bought himself a nice pair of shoes a few days later.

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The next weekend was Remus's birthday party, and since Severus had actually befriended him, he was personally invited to the pregame. When he told Lily, she burst out into a smile.

"Look at you, Sev. You're going to be one of the brothers soon enough."

Severus pulled a face. "Don't give me nightmares," he countered, and Lily had laughed.

The week itself was brutal. He had a midterm in Biochemistry that he spent the first half of the week studying nonstop for, and during the second half, he had to spend an ungodly amount of time in his research lab to finish off the reactions he was supposed to do at the start of the week.

He didn't sleep much, drank far too much caffeine, and desperately needed a way to destress. Luckily, KSE's party typically did just the trick, and he was grateful when Friday rolled around.

At the pre-game, everyone was already very drunk, and Severus almost pitied Remus. He had slid past drunk to properly fucked up and still had to go to the bars. Severus gripped his shoulder empathetically when he exchanged his birthday wishes, and Remus seemed cognizant enough to appreciate the sentiment. Then another shot was forced into his hand, and Sirius Black was there, encouraging Remus on, and they all did another round.

Severus briefly met Sirius's gaze before slipping away and was startled at the lack of malice. Instead, Sirius seemed interested, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. Severus offered him a thin-lipped smile and turned to Lily, who shouted to him over the music.

The pre-game morphed into the party, and Severus only briefly glimpsed James and some of the older brothers shoving Remus through the door. Remus tripped over the doorframe, and then he was gone. Severus could only hope he would return home in one piece.

Despite Remus's absence, the party raged on, and Lily disappeared to talk to some of the other girlfriends of the brothers. Severus sighed, wiping the sweat from his face and pushed through the people in the kitchen to reach the door.

He breathed in deeply, intoxicated by the feeling of fresh, cold air and settled back into his usual spot against the wall. He lit a cigarette and let the buzz from the nicotine calm him down. He had a midterm in Instrumental Methods this week, and it was going to be a bitch of a test. And then he had offered to take one of his coworker's shifts at the library, and his graduate student wanted to do a run-down of his progress in lab so far. In short, he was stressed.

He was mentally cataloging everything he needed to do when a figure started to approach him. Severus's eyes widened when he saw who it was, and he cursed under his breath.

“What do you want, Black?” he asked, and Sirius shrugged, sideling up next to Severus and leaning against the wall.

“Fresh air?” he posed, and Severus rolled his eyes. “Actually, you mind?” he asked, gesturing towards Severus’s cigarette. Severus sighed and handed it to him, watching as the man took a drag.

For all his intents to hate Sirius Black, he couldn’t deny that he was attractive. Almost unbelievably attractive when he got down to it. It was those cheekbones, he thought.

Sirius handed it back to him and tilted his head up to look at the sky. The silence built, and Severus eventually had to break it.

“Not 21 yet?” he asked, and Sirius glanced over at him as if just remembering he was still there. He shook his head.

“Nah, not yet. December.”

Severus nodded, and then couldn’t think of anything to respond with so he let the awkward silence build again. Instead, he offered his cigarette and watched as the smoke curled around Sirius.

“So,” Sirius said, lips curling around the word as if tasting it. “Why do you come to these things?”

Severus froze, trying to read the intent. The one wasn’t accusatory or disparaging, rather it seemed rooted in genuine curiosity.

He shrugged. “Lily invites me, and I generally don’t have anything better to do.”

“Really?” Sirius asked. “I just don’t see how this could be fun for you.”

“Because I don’t drink?” Severus asked slightly irritated, and Sirius thought for a moment.

“Yeah, I guess. I couldn’t do this sober,” Sirius answered.

“That’s why I’m out here,” Severus responded, and Sirius huffed out a laugh.

“Suppose you’re right. I just don’t see people like you here,” he continued, and Severus arched an eyebrow.

“People like what?” he asked, adding an edge to his voice. Sirius observed him for a moment, holding the cigarette close to his face.

“People not like everyone else. Like your friend, Lily. She’s not like,” he gestured towards a flock of freshmen dressed in outfits Severus had seen on at least three different girls.

“You’re not like everyone else,” Severus said, the words out of his mouth before he could think them over. The moment he heard them he wanted to curse.

Sirius laughed, the sound rich and deep. “You can say that again,” he said, and Severus scowled. “It’s nice, you know. How fucking annoying you are.”

Severus didn’t know whether to feel complimented or insulted. “Thanks,” he said dryly, and Sirius smiled. He took another drag, flicked the ash, and handed it back to Severus. Severus took it, watching Sirius closely.

“See you around,” Sirius said, turning back to the door.

“Fuck off, Black,” Severus responded, and Sirius grinned at that before disappearing back into the house, leaving Severus alone and thoroughly confused.

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The next Friday, Severus slipped out earlier than normal. The music and shouting had started to give him a headache, and he desperately needed to get out of the stale, humid air. Outside, he felt much better, once again able to breathe.

He smoked through a cigarette, planning to leave once he finished. He was tired after such a shitty week, and really didn’t know why he had decided to come tonight. Curling up in bed with a book had sounded better in his head, but something had drawn him here, and he was too tired to give up much of a fight.

The cold air gave him an edge of clarity, and even though it was still relatively early, he decided he was going to leave. He took the final drag, dropping the cigarette to the ground and stomping it out.

Just as he was turning to leave, a familiar figure approached him and stopped him in his tracks.

“Black,” Severus said, arching an eyebrow. He couldn’t say why he wasn’t surprised, but he figured he had half-expected Sirius to join him for another smoke. Why? He couldn’t say.

“Got a smoke?” Sirius asked, scooting closer so Severus could hear him over the din. He looked to be drunk, but Severus couldn’t say how far gone he was. Severus fumbled out another cigarette, handed it to Sirius and lit it. Sirius leaned into the flame, shadows cast over his face in a way that fascinated Severus. He wished he had a camera to capture it or the artistic ability to recreate it. The thought almost made him drop his lighter, and he quickly put it back in his pocket.

Sirius inhaled deeply, and they stood in silence, watching as a group of boys got turned away from the door.

“This is fucking bullshit, isn’t?” he muttered, exhaling the smoke into the night. Severus scoffed and leaned heavily against the wall.

“It’s your people, Black,” Severus responded, adding a derisive note to his voice. Sirius glanced over at him and rolled his eyes.

“You’re here too, loser,” Sirius said, handing the cigarette back to Severus.

“Does it look like I belong?” Severus shot back, taking the cigarette and holding it tightly between his fingers. Sirius exhaled a bitter laugh at that and waved away a freshman that had stared to hopefully approach them.

“Nah, you fucking don’t. You’ve got the one bad day away from a school shooter vibe.”

Severus glared at the ground at that, and Sirius laughed again, which only irritated Severus more.

“If so, you’d be the first one I shoot,” Severus said angrily, taking a drag of the cigarette and frowning around it.

“I’m honored,” Sirius sneered. And then in an action contrary to the conversation, he handed Sirius the cigarette, their fingers touching briefly. Sirius sighed and seemed to fractionally relax.

They remained silent for a few moments, and Severus’s fingers twitched. He kept his gaze firmly away from Sirius and tried to cool his anger. It wouldn’t look good if he lost his temper.

“So what do you study?” Sirius finally said, words slurring ever so slightly. Severus blinked and looked at him before quickly looking away.

“Chemistry,” he answered, and Sirius snorted.

“Figures.” He waited a moment for Severus to ask, but when Severus remained quiet, he answered anyway. “Criminal Justice. Whatever the fuck that means.”

“Surprised you actually go to school,” Severus said, trying to ignore an uncomfortable knotting inside his chest. His emotions were all over the place tonight, and he didn’t what to blame.

Sirius grinned, and Severus blinked at the level of bitterness in it. “Yeah, you would be, wouldn’t you? Surprised someone like me could actually have a brain?”

“I have yet to be shown evidence for the contrary,” Severus said, and now he couldn’t seem to look away from Sirius. Something hid on his face that intrigued him, something far deeper than the casual frat act.

Sirius looked at him closely and took a while to respond. Something passed over his eyes, and it would take Severus many days to figure exactly what it was. A broken vulnerability. A bitter pain.

“I used to read when I was young,” Sirius said, looking up into the night sky. “Parents got mad because I would stay up too late. But I loved it. And now...yeah, I guess I don’t anymore.”

“You can still,” Severus protested, but he was interrupted by a harsh laugh.

“Yeah, sure nerd,” Sirius said, and when Severus looked at him again, the vulnerability was gone, replaced by the cruel frat brother Severus so detested. Sirius stubbed the cigarette against the wall and threw it to the ground. “Fuck off, loser,” he growled, and just as quickly as he appeared, he was gone.

Severus stared at the dying ember, the knot in his chest only worsening as he thought of that look in Sirius’s eyes. It took several minutes for him to break from his stupor and head back to his dorm.

Chapter 3

The following Friday, Severus was marginally less surprised when Sirius joined him again. He wordlessly handed Sirius his cigarette, and Sirius sighed into it, eyes fluttering shut.

Severus wasn't sure to make of this or of him, really. Another emotion ran underneath their mutual dislike, and Severus, for the life of him, couldn't figure it out. He wondered if Sirius felt the same.

They didn't talk for a while, and it was almost pleasant. The light brushes of fingers, the dull thrum of music, the steady movements of their chests as they distantly observed the night unfolding around them. It was nothing particularly new to Severus, but with Sirius, it felt elevated.

"Long week?" Severus finally asked, immediately cringing at himself.

Sirius sighed, eyes still shut. "Yeah. Long week," he repeated softly.

Severus scuffed his foot against the hard ground and stared determinedly at a patch of mud. "You want to talk about it?" he said, and then pressed his lips hard together because he sounded like an idiot and really needed to stop talking.

He saw Sirius turning towards him out of the corner of his eye and involuntarily tensed.

"Nah, not really. It was...just family stuff. How was yours?" Sirius asked slowly, tilting his head. Severus scanned the yard and shivered. It really was getting cold now.

He shrugged. "Fine. Spent a lot of time in the library. Nothing that exciting." He trailed off and dug his nails into his palm to distract from the awkwardness. Sometimes he didn't mind how socially inept he could be, but sometimes he hated it.

Sirius shifted closer, and Severus finally looked at him. His brow immediately furrowed in concern. From all these parties, he had never seen Sirius sober.

"Not drinking?" he asked, and Sirius blinked at the words.

"Got a headache," Sirius admitted, wincing. He ran a hand through his hair and glanced back at the door.

"Why are you here?" Severus asked in sour perplexity. "I highly doubt a KSE party would help."

Sirius was quiet for a moment and looked as if about to say something before deciding against it. "It's my house tonight," he explained. "So...yeah."

"Tell them to leave," Severus said in mild aggravation. The stupid brotherhood irked him, especially when one wouldn't stand up for himself in the face of it.

Sirius huffed out a laugh. "Doesn't work like that," he said in bitter resignation.

Severus looked at him in annoyance. "Oh, yes, I forgot the brotherhood," he sneered, and Sirius frowned.

"I can't just stop a party."

"Call the damn cops," Severus said, blowing a cloud of smoke into the night. Sirius looked at him bewildered.

"On my own house? Really?" He laughed in disbelief, and it sounded cruel.

Severus shrugged. "Or suffer. I don't really care what you choose to do." He stubbed out the cigarette and straightened himself out. "Anyway, I'm going home. It was nice chatting with you," he said in a tone that conveyed the exact opposite, and before he could think twice about what he was doing, he walked away, leaving a speechless Sirius Black behind him.

+++++

The next time Severus saw Sirius, almost exactly a week later, Sirius looked to be mind-numbingly drunk. He stumbled outside, and Severus took a step back in caution, trying to gauge the angle in case Sirius threw up again.

Sirius pushed past two brothers, almost tripping over his own feet, before righting himself and making it over to Severus. He crashed into the wall and smiled stupidly at Severus.

"Got a cig?" he slurred, and Severus rolled his eyes and passed the one he was smoking to Sirius. He tapped his fingers against his thigh and tried to figure out why he felt so annoyed. It wasn't like he looked forward to this now. No, it just had to be that he didn't want to deal with a drunkard.

Sirius stared entranced at the cigarette, hand hovering in front of his face.

"You smoke?" he asked, and Severus arched an eyebrow, looking at Sirius as if every sign pointed to a significant lack of intelligence. "Fuck-I mean," Sirius fumbled, "Weed? Do you smoke weed?"

Severus took a moment to respond, his mouth suddenly dry. "Yes, sometimes," he answered, even though he really hadn't, not for a while. Lucius had used to do it in his shit show of a freshman year, and he had done what Lucius did. "Why?"

Sirius looked at him eagerly. "We should do it. Together."

"And take acid too?" Severus said sarcastically, forgetting that all of Sirius's already limited mental capabilities were handicapped.

Sirius's mouth dropped open. "Fuck, really?" he said a little too eagerly, and Severus shot him a look.

"No," he clarified. He almost wanted to retract it by the way Sirius's face fell but decided instead to roll his eyes.

"You ever do it?" Sirius asked, leaning forward.

Back to that shit show of a freshman year then. "Yeah," Severus admitted honestly for gods know what reason. "It was terrible," he added.

"It was fucking wild," Sirius corrected, and Severus didn't bother to argue. It probably wouldn't

have been so bad if it wasn't for-

"Siri!" A voice shrieked out, and Sirius careened around, letting out a curse that caused Severus to raise an eyebrow. A flash of curly black hair and ridiculously long legs came running towards them, and Bellatrix LeStrange, queen of Alpha Phi, threw herself into Sirius's arms. If it wasn't for the wall behind him, Sirius would have tumbled down by the sheer momentum.

"Bella, babe," Sirius said, sounding overwhelmed. "Babe," he repeated, and Bella threw her curls back.

"What are you doing out here?" she said, before looking over at Severus. "Who's that?"

"Um, Severus," Sirius answered, and Severus furrowed his brow at the first name. They usually just referred to each with the last names and a healthy sense of distaste. "Just smoking," he answered, and Bella smiled with perfect teeth at Severus. It was a shark's smile, Severus thought. Entrancing but dangerous.

"What frat are you in anyway, Severus?" she asked, her saccharine tone twisting at his name in a way that set his teeth on edge.

"I'm not-," Severus began, starting to understand how Sirius could feel so overwhelmed by someone by her. What he couldn't understand was why he would want to date someone like her. Lily didn't talk much about her, but that was telling enough as is.

Bella's smile froze, and she turned back to Sirius. "Darling, babe, what are you doing out here with someone like him?"

Sirius glanced wildly at Severus, and Severus felt every doubt of his self-worth resurfacing. It made him angry and sick, and god, he didn't want to be here anymore. He clearly didn't belong, and it was no good pretending otherwise.

"He's my friend," Sirius said, locking eyes with Severus. Severus froze at the word but wasn't able to look away.

Bella's smile faded, and she looked at Sirius in concern. "Okay, baby. How about we get you back inside and we can talk about this in the morning?"

Sirius seemed to regain some of his bearings. "Talk about what?" Bella kissed him, and Severus looked quickly away. Sirius pulled away after a minute. "Talk about what?" he repeated.

Bella smiled again. "Nothing, baby. Don't worry about it."

Sirius seemed posed to argue and looked like he was about to pull away, but then Bella did something with her hands at Sirius's waist that Severus tried to not look too closely at. Sirius's eyes grew heated and his grip on her tightened. They kissed again, and Severus wanted to rip his emotions out of him. Talk about feeling like shit.

"See you next time," Sirius said, pulling away from Bella long enough to get the words out. Bella turned to smile at him, but it was sharp and cruel, and before Severus could think, he flipped her off, and Bella's eyes narrowed. She whispered something into Sirius's ear, and then they were stumbling inside, leaving Severus alone next to a cluster of freshman girls who stared at Bella in awe.

+++++

The next weekend, Sirius didn't come outside, and Severus had to take a very long walk to try not to think about it.

+++++

Hey, it's Sirius. Got your number from Lily.

Hello.

What do you want?

Sorry I didn't come out last night

It's fine. Doesn't matter.

ok I guess

you coming this weekend?

it's toga night

Wasn't planning on it.

I'm not wearing a toga, Black.

plz do

and you better

Fine.

+++++

"Any reason why Sirius wanted your number?" Lily asked between bites of nachos. Severus picked from the plate, taking a moment to respond.

"Can't think of any," he answered, finding the perfect nacho in self-satisfied victory. Lily stared at him in skepticism.

"Okay, yeah sure. What's the reason, Sev?" Lily pressed, green eyes narrowing. "There's definitely a reason."

Severus took a sip of his water. "We send each other our insults ahead of time. So we don't embarrass ourselves in front of you guys by using the same ones," he answered drily.

"Haha," Lily enunciated, clearly unamused. "You really aren't funny," Severus smirked, and Lily frowned. "Really, we thought you guys hated each other."

Severus shrugged. "We do," he said, even though he was increasingly unsure of that every day. "But sometimes he joins me when I smoke—I know, I know, lung cancer," Severus defended, raising his hands as Lily glared at him, "and we, you know, just talk." He paused. "He wants me to come this weekend. In a toga."

Lily tilted her head as if trying to figure him out. "Are you going to?"

Severus ate another nacho and leaned back in this chair. "Don't really have anything better to do,"

he said, and Lily continued to stare at him.

“Do you like him, Sev?” she asked, and Severus felt his insides constrict. He managed a shrug, hoping he looked casual enough.

“He’s still an asshole, Lils,” he said, keeping his tone light. He ignored the feeling of heat that ran through him and really, really tried not to think about what that meant.

“Yeah, he is,” Lily said skeptically. She paused a moment, thinking. “He broke up with Bella yesterday,” she added, and Severus choked on a chip.

“Excuse me?” he said after the coughing subsided. Lily stared at him closely, and Severus shifted underneath her gaze.

“James told me. Apparently they were yelling, and she ran out of their house crying. And he told James it was really done this time.”

“Oh,” Severus said, words fleeing him. “Do you know why?” he finally got out.

“No, he didn’t say. Why do I feel like it has something to do about you?”

“It doesn’t,” Severus said a little too quickly, and Lily’s gaze narrowed.

“Yeah, okay,” she said skeptically. “Just be careful, Sev. These girls can be mean,” she warned. “I would know.” She glanced away quickly before once again meeting his eyes. “You know how to make a toga?”

Severus shook his head, grateful that he could focus on something else. “I was just going to YouTube it.”

Lily smiled tightly, eyes crinkling. “Let me help, okay? I’m not so sure I trust your toga making abilities.”

“It’s just a sheet,” he defended.

“Yeah. That’s the problem. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it’s secured,” she said, adding a wink, and Severus’s lips twitched upwards.

“What would I do without you?” he joked, and Lily pretended to think for a moment before pulling a face.

“I don’t even want to think of it, honestly,” she admitted, and Severus laughed, giddy on some weird mix of emotion that had suddenly come upon him.

Chapter 4

Lily was right. He did need her help.

After several videos of people making it seem easier than it actually was (“it’s hamburger, not hotdog” “Sev, are you even listening?”), Lily had managed to pull together a functioning toga that Severus approved of. She stood back and considered him. Severus felt uneasy under her gaze and wondered what had gone wrong.

“Can I try something?” she asked.

“I...yeah, sure,” Severus agreed after a moment.

Lily nodded and then pulled out her makeup bag. She rummaged through it and pulled out a pen-looking thing. “I want to try some eyeliner on you. Not a lot,” she eased. “But I think it’ll look really good.”

Severus bit his lip and tried to fight down that irrational fear over masculinity and gender norms. He nodded, and Lily smiled. She moved to him, told him what to do, and with slow, steady movements applied some eyeliner on the inside of his eyelid.

She stood back and admired her handiwork.

“You look-,” she began.

“Sickly?” Severus offered, aware of his sallow complexion and bony arms. Lily shook her head and grinned.

“Good, Sev. You look good.”

Severus stared at her incredulously, and Lily laughed.

“Give me ten minutes to get mine on, and we’ll be good to go,” she said, leaving the room and heading towards the bathroom.

Severus sat on his bed and waited. He glanced at himself in the mirror again and tried to see what Lily saw. There was that crooked nose of his and he looked like he rarely saw the sun, but he did have nice dark eyes he thought, especially with whatever Lily had done. And he guessed there was something striking in the severity of his face, even though he doubted anyone would find it attractive.

He didn’t look like Sirius Black, that’s for sure. At the thought of him, his heart jumped up in his chest in a racket of nerves. He wasn’t sure what to make of any of this, and he hated how Sirius could cause so much uncertainty in him.

He still had no idea what to think of Sirius. A part of him, he had to admit, did like him. He understood what Lily meant when she said that he could look at you in a way that made you feel like unlike anyone else. And when Sirius looked at him like that it was easy to forget who he was, which at the end of the day, was an entitled frat asshole.

And Severus had dealt with an entitled asshole already, and he really wasn’t inclined to let it happen again.

So, yes, maybe he did want to continue smoking with Sirius. But he also couldn't forget where and who he belonged with, and it was decidedly not with KSE or Sirius Black. At some point, he was going to have to draw that line or risk fucking himself over badly again.

And since he had used up all his free counseling sessions, he really did not want to do that.

Severus was interrupted from his thoughts by Lily entering in a much more revealing toga than Severus's. She had thrown some gold eyeshadow on and looked stunning. She threw a makeup brush at him.

"Stop looking at me like that. James's going to get jealous," she teased, and Severus laughed.

"I don't know how he got so lucky, Lily."

"Oh, god shut up," Lily said and walked over to Severus's mini-fridge. She pulled out a water bottle of wine. "We probably should go. The party's already started." She checked her phone. "I'll call the uber."

They rushed out when the uber arrived, drawing some glances, and soon arrived at the house. The tell-tale colored lights illuminated the blinds, and a few girls in small cloths of sheet approached. They followed and slipped inside, immediately onslaught by the mixture of people and the pounding music from the basement.

Severus started to gravitate towards the wall, but Lily pulled him forward to the living room and he had no choice but to follow. Fortunately, most people were still in the basement so they didn't have to push past many. Lily exchanged some quick hellos, but then they were in the living room and there were a group of people clustered around a plastic table, cups aligned for beer pong.

At one end stood James who held the ping-pong ball perfectly poised in one hand. He had done up his hair in a laurel and looked the spitting image of some ancient Greek hero – his namesake really. He threw the ball and then looked over, smiling brightly when he saw Lily. Even Severus felt a little knocked over by the way he looked at her, and he was grateful Lily had found someone like that who treated her as she deserved.

He gestured that they join, which Severus was happy to decline, but Lily pulled him forward until they stood at the end of the table. James pulled Lily into her arms, kissing the top of her head, and Peter shoved him lightly, telling him to get back in the game.

Severus didn't fully process this because standing across the table was Sirius Black. Their eyes had locked, and it felt like all the oxygen had left this already airless room. He struggled to swallow but his mouth had gone dry and his heartbeat felt far too loud.

Their gaze broke when Remus shoved Sirius aside and positioned himself to throw the ball. He managed to sink the throw, laughing as he turned to Sirius for a high-five. Sirius took too long to respond, but Remus laughed it off, cheeks red from alcohol. Sirius smiled and then turned to Frank. Severus couldn't hear what they were saying, but he couldn't manage to look away. Fortunately, that meant he caught it when Sirius jerked his head towards the door.

He gave a small nod and pushed past a few girls. He heard a few shouts behind him, mainly Peter saying something about Sirius, but then he was out of the room. He started to head outside when a hand grabbed his arm and pulled him to the stairs.

He jerked away and stumbled backward away from the person. It was Sirius, of course, and he looked at him a little too intensely.

"It's too cold out there," Sirius explained, and Severus nodded, rubbing his arm.

"Okay," he said, desperate to forget that he had reacted so strongly to a simple touch and headed upstairs. Sirius followed closely behind.

Severus stopped at the top of the stairs, unsure of where to go. Sirius pushed past him, knocking loudly on a door, pressing his ear against it, waiting a moment and then opened it slowly. He looked in and quickly shut the door, wincing and rubbing his eyes.

"Ah god, not that one," he muttered. "Jesus, this is why I knock." He turned to the next door and repeated the process. Fortunately, this one was empty, and Severus followed him in. Sirius closed the door behind them, locking it for good measure. Sirius also left the lights off and only the dim light from the street cast shadows on them.

It was as standard of a frat room as it could be – essentially, a complete mess. Trash piled up in one corner and clothes littered the floor. Severus pulled a face.

"Sorry, best I can do," Sirius apologized, glancing around the room.

"We could go outside," Severus said, and Sirius looked at him dubiously.

"In these?" he asked, gesturing towards the thin toga. "Yeah, no."

Severus fell silent.

"We can still smoke, you fucking addict. We'll just open the window." He stepped over a pile of the clothing, grimacing at something he smelled. He trekked to the window and pulled it open, sitting on the windowsill. "Come on," he said, gesturing towards Severus.

Severus took a breath to steady himself and followed. He stood next to Sirius and reached inside a makeshift pocket in the toga to pull out the pack of cigarettes. He remained standing, but Sirius rolled his eyes and told him to sit.

He obliged, even though the window sill was far too small and it meant that their knees knocked together, and Severus suddenly felt hyperaware of his body.

He handed the cigarette to Sirius who took it and placed it in his mouth. Severus pulled out the lighter, and Sirius leaned towards it, dark hair falling forward. Severus reached out to brush a strand away so that he wouldn't set it on fire, and his breath caught at the feeling of Sirius's soft hair against his fingertips. His itched to run his hand through it.

He clicked open the lighter quickly and the flame illuminated them. Sirius leaned forward to dip the cigarette into the flame and pulled away, taking a drag and exhaling it slowly. He handed it back to Severus who tried to hide how much his hands shook.

"So," Sirius said, and Severus remained silent. "I like your toga." He spoke casually, glancing down as another group of people exited a car.

"Thanks," Severus responded, having to start again as his voice caught. Sirius looked over at him, and his eyes narrowed.

"Are you wearing eyeliner?" he asked, and instead of freezing, Severus felt defensive. Thank god, there was some of that old anger of his. He hated feeling unmoored, and his spite anchored him.

"Yes," he said bluntly. "Lily did it."

Sirius nodded. "It looks...good," he finished, looking back out the window. Severus suddenly felt exposed, and he shivered as a gust of cold wind blew through the window. "I broke up with Bella," Sirius said, taking a drag from the cigarette and sighing.

"I heard," Severus said after a moment, and Sirius's dark eyes met his before glancing away. "Can I-," he began but cut himself off. He wasn't sure it was appropriate to ask.

"Yeah?" Sirius asked, irritation filtering through. He looked back at Severus, eyes narrowing.

"Why?" Severus asked simply. Sirius thought for a moment and leaned backward.

"I don't like it when people tell me what I can and can't do."

Severus fell silent; everything seemed to imply the breakup was over him, but he didn't dare be so bold.

"What is it?" Sirius finally asked, the irritation solidifying. Severus scowled and took the cigarette back from him. His hands had stopped shaking, fortunately, and the cold air helped clear his head.

"I have a feeling this was over me. Was it not?" he asked, the irritation becoming mutual.

Sirius laughed, but it lacked any delight or amusement. "Don't flatter yourself, Snape," he cut back harshly, and Severus's scowl deepened. He had been a fool to think anything had changed between them.

"It certainly seemed to align with her finding out about us, did it not?" Severus spat back, and Sirius laughed again but couldn't hide the shakiness behind it.

"Sure, if you want," Sirius responded apathetically, and his tone set anger pulsing through Severus.

"God, you're so fucking irritating, Black," Severus sneered, and he glared at him when Sirius turned back towards him. His eyes were wide, and he seemed more sober than anything.

"Can I ask you something?" Sirius finally said, his voice tentative. His tone took Severus aback, and the frustration abetted slightly.

"What?"

"Why don't you like me?" Sirius asked. He kept his eyes fixated on Severus and reached out to take the cigarette back.

"Excuse me?" Severus asked, blinking hard. Of all things, he had not expected this.

"Why don't you like me?" Sirius repeated, and his tone remained open and curious. He seemed subdued from earlier. He looked at Sirius in disbelief and then in anger as he remembered how fucking shitty he made him feel.

"Why don't I like you?" Severus repeated, furrowing his brow. His scowl remained entrenched on his face and he gripped his knees to stop himself from doing something physical. "You're an asshole, last time I checked."

"Yeah, but-," Sirius began, but Severus cut him off, anger and disappointment throbbing behind his eyes. He had expected something different, and he hated the direction the night had taken. All he wanted to do was smoke a cigarette and have a nice conversation and now he was stuck with fucking this.

“You’re a fucking dick, Black, and if you can’t see that about yourself, then you’ve got serious problems.”

“Yeah, but, listen-,” Sirius tried again, raising his hands. Severus glowered at him.

“What?” he spat. God, half of him want to punch him bloody and the other half-well, he was going to ignore that for now. He gripped his knees tighter.

“Everyone likes me,” Sirius explained, and his aura of arrogance was like a nail in Severus’s side.

“Oh, did I mention that you’re a fucking arrogant asshole at that?” Severus sneered, and his breathing quickened with his rage. God, why did he expect anything different?

He was about to stand and storm away when Sirius reached out and grabbed his shoulder. Severus was too surprised to shrug him off.

“Just listen. Can you do that? I know it might be hard to get it through your fucking thick skull.” Severus was about to respond, but Sirius cut him off. “Fuck, listen. Everyone fucking likes me. Or if they don’t, they want to be me or they want to fuck me, or all three. No matter what I fucking say or do. But not you. Why the fuck don’t you like me?” Sirius ended breathlessly, eyes narrowed. Severus blinked hard and had to consciously shut his mouth.

“I don’t,” he began, stumbling over the words. “You’re cruel, Black. You look at people like me and think of the best way to tear us down. Ever since our first- so that’s why I don’t like you, okay? Because I’ve dealt with this fucking shit before and I refuse to let it happen again.”

“You have?” Sirius asked, leaning closer. Confusion and curiosity marked his countenance, and it made Severus half want to laugh and half want to scream.

“Yeah,” Severus began, suddenly feeling short of breath. Jesus, why did it suddenly get it so hot? “Yeah, I did. People like you aren’t,” he forced out between increasingly labored breaths. “Aren’t good,” he finished weakly and leaned heavily against the windowsill. He tried to breathe, but it had suddenly become very difficult. The fact that he couldn’t sent panic coursing through him, and he shut his eyes and tried to count. He gripped tightly at the wooden paneling for support. God, why couldn’t he breathe? What was wrong? What was happening?

He heard someone speaking but couldn’t make out the words behind the blind rush of panic. He shouldn’t be here, he thought frantically. However, he found he didn’t have the strength to move and the fact that he was stuck drove all the air from his lungs so he was gasping at nothing.

He heard the voice again, but it meant nothing to him. Instead, he had the distant recognition that he was having what his counselor had labeled as a panic attack, but he couldn’t remember anything beyond that. He distantly registered someone in front of him, and that had to be Sirius, didn’t it? Then the thought of Sirius sent another rush of panic through him, and he was gasping at nothing but so fucking frightened over it.

He sensed Sirius moving in front of him, and then there were arms around him, pulling into a chest and pressing his head into the crook of a neck. He sucked in a gasp of air, and usually, physical contact made him itch, but this didn’t for some reason. He felt comfortable, some very small part him thought as the rest of him screamed. He felt safe.

A hand rested on his back, rubbing small circles, and the gentle, repetitive motion provided something measurable to which he could push through the panic to time his breathing. With every complete breath in, he felt marginally better, and after some time of the steady in and out, he was

able to think past the panic and lift his head to blink blearily, and as his position became clear to him, he yanked back.

“Fuck,” he croaked, and embarrassment rushed through his system. It felt like a physical sting that hit every one of his organs, and he wanted to curl up into himself, awash in self-hatred and shame. He couldn’t look at Sirius, couldn’t think at all of what had happened. He felt dizzy and sick and god, he had to get out of here and never talk to Sirius again and maybe he could forget this had happened.

Jesus, the *humiliation*.

He stood up, stumbling backward in his rush to get away. He almost tripped over a pile of clothes but managed to right himself and then he was out the door and running as fast as he could through the crowd of people, not stopping until he safe in his room and only then could he really start to cry.

+++++

Hey, can we talk?

No. There’s nothing to say.

think there is

i just want make sure ur ok

plz Severus

No. Please stop texting me.

This isn’t anything bad

I just really need to talk to u

Anyone ever tell you you’re a child

Fuck, sorry, just fucking respond okay?

Severus?

I’m not letting this go

Fine. We’ll do it ur way.

+++++

Hey Reggie

Ur good friends with Severus Snape, right?

Um yeah we are

Why?

I guess this is kind of vague

But was there anything that happened to him?

What do u mean?

Like something bad I guess

Like someone didn't treat him right

Um you might just want to talk with him

Can't it's complicated

Then im not really sure I feel ok telling you?

It's kinda personal to him

Plz Reggie

I'm not doing this to be a dick

He's like kinda my friend now

And something happened and I just want to make sure hes ok

Ur friends?

Lol I would never have thought in a million years

Yeah me either

Okay well u better not be lying

Cause that would be really really shitty of you

No, honestly

U can ask Lily

Yeah just did

Ok seems legit

Love ur faith in me

Okay so basically he was roommates with Lucius Malfoy freshman year

That's how I met him, cause I used to be friends with him too

And ur going to have ask him for the details but basically Lucius was really shitty to him

And it wasn't a good situation

So Lucius Malfoy?

Uh yeah

U really should talk to Sev though

Yeah I'm trying

Thank u Reggie

U coming home for break?

Not sure

Don't think I can stand Mom

yeah I know

I would like you there tho

Ok I'll think about it

Chapter 5

Severus had spent the entire past week trying as hard as possible not to think about Saturday night.

With two midterms and his research, he had been largely successful except for when the shame and humiliation would cut through him like a heated knife and shrivel his insides. He then would carry it for hours, coupled with the gut-wrenching fear that he would turn the corner or walk through the student center and see *him*.

He spent a lot of time in his room this week. He shrugged off Lily's concern, postponed his lunch date with Regulus, and picked up as many shifts as he could the library that weekend so there wouldn't even be the question if he had time to do anything else.

Lily had asked him, of course, and mentioned Sirius, and Severus tried his best to play it off, citing his job as his excuse. Lily's eyes had narrowed slightly, and he knew she could see through his feeble attempt, but because she was a good friend, she let it go and let him retain his one remaining shred of dignity.

He also dutifully ignored Sirius's texts even though every vibration of his phone sent threads of panic spinning through him. He had briefly considered responding, but he knew it would be a mistake. He couldn't handle the idea of humiliating himself any more than he already had.

Luckily, the library acted as a sanctuary for him. In the late hours on Friday night, all one could hear was the soft rustling of paper, the persistent clack of typing, and the occasional cough and sneeze. It felt removed from all the chaos outside; here there was nothing but the quiet, determined pursuit of knowledge.

For the first time in a week, he felt at ease. Immersed in a practice problem for Biochemistry, he had nothing to think of but glycolysis and ATP and the unfailing mechanisms of energy creation. There was no Sirius Black and there was no Lucius Malfoy. It was just him and chemistry and the library at night and –

“Hey,” a voice broke the silence, practically an insult to the library. Severus's pencil froze on the paper, and he kept his gaze firmly focused on the formula for glucose creation.

“What-What are you doing here?” he managed, having to clear his throat at the first word. He forced his head up and took in the sight of Sirius Black and decided that tonight would be a good enough one to end it all.

Sirius shrugged, and he looked sober, which surprised Severus. Sirius had dressed as if he was partying – ripped black jeans and a dark blue button-down that flattered him greatly now that Severus thought about, which he decidedly didn't.

“Party was boring,” he said, “Mind if I join?” and before Severus could answer, Sirius had jumped over the desk in a move that was far more graceful than should be expected and sat heavily in the chair next to him. He leaned back in the chair and rested his hands behind his head. Severus stared at him, and Sirius met his gaze evenly. “Why aren't you answering my texts?” he asked, spinning the chair back and forth.

Severus's mouth suddenly went very dry, but he needed to reply. “Wasn't anything to say.”

Sirius stared at him undeterred. "I'm going to have to disagree with you on that one."

"I'd have to disagree back," Severus said quickly, grip tightening on the pencil.

Sirius tilted his head and considered him for a minute. Severus itched underneath his gaze. "Do you get them often? Or am I just special?"

Severus grit his teeth. Leave it to Sirius to ignore every sign to leave him alone. "I don't see why you care."

Sirius actually looked surprised at that and stopped in his swiveling. He looked like he was about to speak but was interrupted when another student approached the desk. She carried a pile of book and looked tired.

She smiled at Severus in weary recognition, and he offered a thin smile back. Her gaze flickered over to Sirius, and she stumbled, almost dropping the books. She caught herself and placed the books on the desk for Severus to begin to check them out.

"Hi," Sirius said nonchalantly, and the girl let out a huff of disbelief.

"Hi," she responded. "Wouldn't have expected to find you in the library on Friday night."

Sirius smiled at her, wide and toothy. "What can I say? Full of surprises."

The girl shook her head. "I used to go to your parties. Back when I was a freshman and particularly stupid. But fortunately, no longer." The girl smiled and took the books back from Severus, packing them into her backpack.

Sirius laughed at that. "Yeah, well, you're always welcome back."

"Thank you but that phase of my life is over. Probably for the best. Anyway, have a good night the both of you."

They responded in her kind and watched as she walked through the doors. Severus looked back at the computer and pretended to click through some files. He could Sirius's gaze return to him, but he was determined not to let on.

"When do you get off?" Sirius asked, and Severus glanced at the clock. 12:17 - about forty minutes to go.

"At one," he replied, and Sirius grimaced.

"So you just sit here?"

"I do my homework and study. It's really not that bad," Severus explained, glancing back at the forgotten problem set.

"Guess so," Sirius said, sounding unconvinced. He paused a moment, and Severus glanced over at him. "You never answered my question."

Severus bit his lip and turned away. "Can we not do this here?"

"Okay," Sirius replied relatively quickly. "Then I'll wait." And then with that casual arrogance that Severus despised but also found incredibly alluring, he reached over and grabbed a book that a quick glance of the title revealed to be about women's psychology, specifically from Medieval England. Sirius flipped open the book, settled back and started to read. Severus looked at him

astonished but didn't comment. He knew deep down he was not going to win this fight. Instead, he turned back to the problem set and worked through them for the next forty minutes, interrupted only a few times by students just as perturbed by the presence of Sirius as Severus was.

One o'clock arrived, and Severus clocked out. He turned to Sirius to let him know, but Sirius had already put the book away and started to stand. "Smoke?" he asked, and Severus stared at him skeptically. He couldn't read Sirius's intentions and from the unfathomable complex of emotions in his chest, he couldn't understand his either. However, he did nod and stand, grabbing his coat and wrapping his green scarf around his neck.

Sirius seemed to look at him particularly closely for a moment, but then that moment broke, and they headed outside, hands shoved into pockets and bodies braced for the cold. The night was a startling relief from the sterile library lighting and temperature control, and he shivered. Severus glanced up at the sky only to find clouds obscuring the stars.

"I didn't bring my cigs," he said softly, the night stealing the harshness from him. Sirius looked at him, but Severus kept his gaze firmly fixed on the path in front of him. The path was empty, but he could hear the shouts and giggles of girls finding their way home. He retraced the familiar steps, and Sirius followed closely.

Sirius patted his pockets and pulled a face. "Me either. Oh well."

"Hmm," Severus responded, yawning. Shifts at the library, especially late at night, always left him tired.

"Severus," Sirius began, and Severus felt his insides freeze. He swallowed hard against the growing lump in his throat.

"What?" he asked directly.

"Is it...is it okay if ask about what happened?" Sirius asked, voice marred by hesitation. Severus looked over at him, eyes wide. He hadn't expected Sirius to ask for permission.

Perhaps the fact that he did explained why Severus muttered out a yes before he could think to clearly of it. Once it was out, however, he couldn't take it back.

Sirius ran his hands down his coat and drew in a breath. "You had a panic attack," he stated more than asked, and Severus nodded, biting his lip hard. The physical pain felt like a welcome relief from all the mental turmoil. "Have you...when...umm just-," Sirius fumbled, and Severus sighed.

"Just ask me, Sirius," he said and then realized this was the first time he had used his first name. He wasn't sure if Sirius noticed either, and he wasn't about to look at him to see.

"Fine. When did they start?" he said in a rush of words.

"In college," Severus responded quietly. "My freshman year."

"Because of Malfoy?" Sirius asked, and Severus stopped walking. It took Sirius a second to notice, but he stopped quickly and took a few steps back to his side.

"How do you know that?" Severus asked, his voice shaking. The ground felt unstable underneath him, and he felt like he was going to fall.

"I texted Reggie about it. Just to see why there would any reason for you to have said what you did. He didn't tell me much, just that Lucius Malfoy was kind of the reason for it," Sirius explained

quickly, and Severus tensed at the name.

“He-,” he began, the words clawing out of his chest. “He was my roommate. Freshman year.”

“Yeah,” Sirius responded quietly.

“He umm,” Severus began, his throat feeling as if it was closing up. He wanted to sink to his knees but kept himself upright.

“What happened?” Sirius asked softly, and Severus glanced wildly at him, expecting to see scorn or pity or some other stupid emotion that would make him feel small and worthless.

He was only met with concern, a concern that he sensed was rooted in kindness and empathy. It suddenly made the night feel not as cold. “He took advantage of me,” he stuttered out, eyes flickering shut at the rush of memories. “Came from a wealthy family. He was, you know, arrogant and entitled and *cruel*.” He broke off and took a moment to steady himself. Sirius waited patiently beside him, and Severus let the following story slip out as he tried not to think of the consequences.

“I don’t really...he made me do stuff I wasn’t comfortable with. Like, when I did acid like we talked about?” Severus continued, feeling almost light-headed at how he was openly talking about this. He felt giddy but in a very sick, troubling sense.

“Yeah,” Sirius answered, his voice a mere whisper, and Severus gave a twitchy nod of his head.

“He gave me the tab when I was sleeping.” The words rushed out, and he was amazed at his brazenness. Sirius let out a hard sound and tensed. “He terrorized me,” he continued quietly. “Made it really difficult for me to live. And freshman year was already pretty hard for me and my mom wasn’t doing well at that time either so it was just too much for me to handle. That’s when I had my first, you know, and my mental health pretty much deteriorated.”

“Did you,” Sirius began, words seeming to laden his tongue, “Did you ask to move?”

Severus let out a harsh laugh. “Yes. Of course, I did. Lily knew something wasn’t right, so I asked to move, you know? Lily said I had to. But Lucius, he, I don’t know, but the resident coordinator wouldn’t listen to me. Wouldn’t believe I was having any trouble with someone as respected and revered as a Malfoy. And yeah, I don’t know. I don’t know why she didn’t care. But I wasn’t able to move so I lived with him that year, and I haven’t talked to him since. That’s why - you kind of remind me of him, Sirius. Maybe not anymore, and maybe not to that extreme, but in the beginning, that’s exactly who I thought of.”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said, voice thick. “I didn’t know.”

Severus gripped his book bag, trying to suppress the jittery feeling that had overtaken him. He felt naked and vulnerable before Sirius, and it made his skin burn. He gave a nervous shake of his shoulders. “How would you?”

“Because I should have,” Sirius responded, and then he got very quiet. Severus waited, hands starting to go numb against the cold. “I should have known,” he repeated, and the inflection of self-loathing took Severus aback. He blinked hard and stared at Sirius.

“Why?” Severus asked, confused and shocked at Sirius’s reaction. “It’s not like you knew him, right?” Sirius shook his head and looked poised to say something. “Yeah, then how the hell would you have known?”

Sirius twisted his mouth and ran a hand over his face. "I guess I shouldn't have then," he said quietly and lacking emotion. Severus furrowed his eyebrows. He didn't know Sirius that well but even he could tell there was something more going on.

"What is it?" Severus asked, voice harsher than he would have liked. Sirius flinched slightly and shut his eyes.

"Takes one to know one, huh?" he asked, and Severus instantly flashed back to their first meeting.

"Sirius...", Severus began, feeling lost and frightened of assuming wrong. "What is it?"

Sirius laughed brokenly and ran a hand over his face, pushing his hair back. "Someone also...took advantage of me. So I should have recognized it in you. You know what I mean?" he paused and cursed. "It doesn't matter. We don't need to talk about this."

"James?" Severus asked instantly as his was the first name to pop into his mind. James came across well, and Lily loved him, but that could mean nothing.

Sirius huffed out a laugh and had the mind to look offended. "James is the best person I've ever met."

"Okay," Severus said, staring at Sirius confused and increasingly concerned. Sirius looked as Severus did when he was trying but failing to hold himself together. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But I'll listen if you do."

Sirius drew in a haggard breath and crumpled slightly. "I don't really tell people, you know? Like anyone." Fear streaked his voice, and Severus empathized. He had hidden what Lucius had done to him for months and months from Lily. The shame was palpable, and he had done his best to disguise it. But eventually, Lily and Regulus had sat him down and offered him the chance to speak freely and without judgment and he had done so and felt better than he had since it had all started. It was comfort in its purest form, and he hadn't realized how badly he needed it.

"I was the same with Lucius. I didn't tell Lily for a long time, but when I did," he tried to comfort, but in a strangled sentence, Sirius cut him off.

"It was my uncle," he choked. "When I was young. And my mum, I told her, but she said we couldn't ruin the family's reputation, so she told me never to tell anyone." Sirius fell silent as if he had been cut and breathed heavily, eyes closed tightly and mouth entrenched in a frown. He cursed, and as he did, Severus moved without thinking or rather thinking of what he would have wanted in a moment like this. Words would be meaningless to him, but he would desperately need a steady physical touch to know that he wasn't alone.

So that's what he did, closing the distance between them and pulling Sirius into a hug. Sirius froze initially, body tense, but Severus remained undeterred. He only made sure to keep his arms loose so there was no sense of entrapment. It took a minute or two, but Sirius slowly raised his arms and wrapped them around Severus. Something came over him because he gripped tightly at the back of Severus's jacket and pulled him in close, wedging Severus's nose into the crook of his neck.

He breathed frantically, letting out soft sounds of pain, and gripped onto Severus as if to let go would be to lose himself. Severus held on tightly back, distantly overwhelmed by how close he was to Sirius, how his hair tickled his cheeks, and his arms were strong and muscular. However, he was much more momentarily focused on how to comfort Sirius, so taking notes from Lily and in a sense, Sirius, he rubbed circles into the small of his back and whispered as softly as he could words of comfort.

Sirius shuddered against him and tightened his grip. He had pressed his head against Severus's and they were so, so close, and Severus decided then that he never really wanted to let go.

But eventually, they did as Sirius pulled back and ran a hand over his face. He stared hard at the ground, lips pressed tightly together. His shoulders radiated tension. "I've never seen you at the counseling center," he said shakily.

"I've used up my free sessions," Severus responded, keeping his voice neutral. Here was perhaps the most fragile moment of it all – the moment to see if they could reclaim normalcy. "Can't afford to go anymore."

Sirius glanced up at him. "That's bullshit," and Severus huffed out a bitter laugh.

"Yeah, it is. When you're poor, you can't really afford to be mentally ill," he admitted and in the second afterward realized that Sirius probably didn't know about his finances, didn't know they lay at polar opposite sides of the economic spectrum. The idea made him feel ashamed, and he wished he could have taken it back.

"Also bullshit," Sirius said, seeming to regain some normalcy as his face relaxed slightly. "You won't let me pay for them, will you?" Severus looked at him offended, and Sirius nodded. "Yeah, figured."

"I'm not a charity case," he explained quietly, and Sirius nodded in understanding.

"Of course. But you can always accept help, you know?" Sirius responded and then sighed, running his hands down his jacket. "Anyway, you look freezing. Let's get you back, okay?"

Severus scowled and buried his face in his scarf, and Sirius smiled in amused exasperation. "Fine," he muttered, and they started walking again, following the path to Severus's dorm. Everything was dark except for the lights illuminating the path.

They walked close to each other, almost close enough to brush, and Severus felt something coil in his stomach. He did his best to ignore it.

"How was your week?" Sirius asked, almost absent-mindedly.

"Terrible," Severus growled. "Had a brutal midterm and spent too much time in my lab."

"What kind of research do you do?" Sirius followed up, his breath fogging before him.

"It's in organometallic chemistry if you know what that is? We're trying to figure out how to create organic polymers to repair damage to the nervous system," Severus explained, feeling comfortable talking about something he knew so intimately.

"I honestly have no idea what that is, but it sounds pretty cool, Sev," Sirius said, and Severus instantly noticed the nickname. Only Lily and Regulus called him that.

"Sev?" he asked wirily, and Sirius glanced over at him.

"Do you not like-?" Sirius began, sounding concerned. Severus shook his head.

"No, it's fine. I just like how we've gone from last names to...this," he trailed off, and instead of smiling, Sirius looked serious. Severus suddenly didn't want to hear what he had to say, so he babbled on. "Do you I have to call you Siri now?" he joked, and Sirius pulled a face.

“Do I look an iPhone?” he asked and grimaced. “Bella used to call me that, so please do not ever.” He paused and then rethought what he had said. “Not like I’m sad about her, just that I don’t want to have you remind me of her? Fuck, how do I say this? I don’t want you to be like her, I guess. Does that make sense?”

Severus nodded. “Any other nicknames I could use then?” he asked, his sleepiness taking away his concern of how he sounded.

Sirius huffed out a laugh. “James, Remus, and Peter sometimes call me Padfoot. It came from a dumb joke between us, but it stuck. So if you want to use that one...”

“Okay, Padfoot,” Severus liked how the name sounded on his lips, and the sudden intimacy made him feel special. “Well, this is where I live,” he said, gesturing toward the building they had just walked in front of. “I’ll see you next Friday then?” he said awkwardly, always unsure of how to end conversations like this. Sirius smiled.

“You better. And please stop ignoring my texts. It’s really annoying,” he said, but his tone was light and lacked malice. Severus smiled and felt like he should reach out to Sirius again, especially with how Sirius was looking at him, but the moment passed, and he said goodnight and turned away, swiping into the dorm and the security it offered.

Chapter 6

How did the midterm go?

Why do I feel like ur always taking tests

Because I am.

It was fine. I had studied as much as I could.

How was your presentation?

ehh honestly okay

had a honor's kid in my group and she was so surprised I actually did work

I don't blame her.

thanks

but yeah it was ok, prof seemed to like it

and the death penalty is fucking bs anyway

I suppose.

U don't think so do you?

I believe some people do deserve death.

yeahh but it's better if we just make them go insane by locking them in a box

anyway we kill innocent people with it which is fucked

Yes, suppose we do.

Yo can I ask

Where r u politically? D or R?

Not that I care really but im curious

I don't ascribe my political beliefs to a pre-set doctrine.

I have what I believe based on experience and that's it.

Fair enough

Honestly should have expected that from you lol

You have the anarchist vibe :)

Along with the school shooter?

Yeah it works for you lol

Fams hardcore republicans but i went the liberal snowflake way to piss them off

Also because equality blah blah blah

That's funny, Padfoot.

Not surprised either.

:)

Ok I have class talk to you later

+++++

Hey super sorry but I'm feeling like crap

So I won't be going to the party tonight

It's okay. I understand.

I think James etc and I are planning to get lunch before break

Lily's coming I think?

You should join

Okay. I'll think about it.

Cool. See u soon

I hope you feel better.

+++++

Happy thanksgiving Sev

Thanks. You too.

Anything ur grateful for?

Yes. Of course.

And?

I don't particularly want to list them, Sirius.

But I suppose our confusing friendship could be one of them.

Lol feel the same

Glad ur just as confused as I am

Gtg moms calling :/

Tell Reggie I say hi.

Good luck.

Will do and thanks J

+++++

“It’s just so nice, Sev,” Lily said, smiling.

“Lily,” Severus warned and Lily’s smile only widened.

“I’m so happy your friends with them. They all like you too. And I never thought you and Sirius would get along”

Severus rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know how it happened either.”

“Yeah, well it’s nice,” she finished as they approached the restaurant. Severus had followed through with Sirius’s request, and they were meeting up with the four of them before winter break. Severus still wasn’t exactly sure what to make of it.

The hostess led them to the table – a booth in the back corner with names etched into the wood. James stood and smiled, pulling Lily into a hug. She took a seat next to him, and Severus slid in beside Remus. He glanced over at Sirius who sat next to James, but he had focused intently on his straw.

They exchanged formalities and then broke into light conversation. Their energy was contagious, and the sheer familiarity between the four of them almost made Severus envious. People didn’t make connections like that often, and it was amazing to see it play out before him.

Sirius took a moment but broke out of his initial stupor. Their eyes met, and Sirius offered a small smile, which Severus returned. Everyone else fell away in that moment until James swung his arm around Sirius’s shoulder and the moment was lost.

Sirius, as always, was infectious with his charm, and he didn’t seem to put the typical frat boy act that he costumed himself up in during parties. He also wasn’t drunk, and Severus decided he liked him best that way. He was more himself and all the more intriguing for it.

The conversation turned to break, which Severus desperately needed. He needed to see Mom again, even if it meant Dad and him were destined for a fight.

Everyone else expressed a similar sentiment of desperately needing a break, and they bemoaned about finals. Severus found himself laughing over it, and Lily met his gaze, eyes bright and delighted.

“Severus,” Sirius cut across, and the other voices at the table fell silent. Severus suddenly felt anxious, but he was comforted by Sirius’s tone. It was one of his kinder ones. “Where are you going to be for winter session?” he asked, picking at a French fry.

“I’ll be here,” Severus responded. “I have a research grant so I’ll be in lab most of it.”

Sirius nodded and ate the fry. “With all your organometals and whatnot?”

Severus nodded. “Yeah. What about you guys?”

“Got an internship in New York,” Sirius said, leaning backward. He stared at Severus until Severus

had to look away. James took the cue to follow up.

“Yeah, same. We’re staying in the same apartment,” he clarified to Severus who nodded.

“I’ll be abroad,” Lily said brightly. “I can’t wait. Four weeks in New Zealand.” James pressed a kiss against the side of her head.

“I’ll be in D.C.,” Remus continued. “Also internship.”

“And I’ll be home working,” Peter finished. “Gonna miss you guys.” They all muttered a similar sentiment, except for Severus and Lily who watched. They finished up their meal, the conversation turning once again to school and KSE drama. Severus watched amused, offering sarcastic comments where he could. One made Sirius laugh particularly hard, and it sent a warm glow to spread through Severus’s chest.

The waitress came, and they paid, standing to go. James and Lily broke off, walking a little bit in front of anyone. Sirius held back, letting Remus and Peter walk ahead, so it was just the two of them.

“So,” Sirius began, and Severus felt his stomach twist. They hadn’t been able to talk in person since that one night; their busy schedules kept clashing and Severus had come down with the seasonal dorm sickness that had spread down his hallway room by room. This would be their last chance to talk for a while, and Severus tried to keep the regret out of his voice.

“Yeah?” he prompted.

“You should come visit me in New York. If you can,” Sirius said, glancing over at him.

“Okay, I’ll have to let you know. My research schedule is pretty heavy,” Severus countered, ignoring how the invitation made him feel.

“Please actually have fun sometime? For me?”

Severus smirked and huffed out a laugh. “I’ll do my best. And please don’t get into much trouble? For me?”

Sirius smiled at that and ducked his head. Severus’s hands twitched to reach out and touch him, but he suppressed the desire and turned his mind toward other matters.

“Are you going home for Christmas?” he asked, and Sirius scowled.

“Don’t want to, but feel like I should for Reggie. Otherwise, he’s just stuck with Mom.”

Severus indicated his understanding. “Well, I wish you luck then. Mine probably won’t be any better so I can’t offer you a place to flee.”

Sirius crinkled his brow and turned his head towards Severus. “Do you not get along with your family?” he asked, voice growing softer. Severus shook his head and gave a resigned smile.

“My Mom and I get along fine. Just my Dad and I have a hard time being in the same room.”

“Why?” Sirius asked. Severus could have sworn he seemed a little breathless, but he decided against it.

“We don’t see eye to eye on a lot. Wants me to get like a real job. None of this college bullshit.”

"That's stupid," Sirius responded flatly. Severus shrugged.

"That was how he was raised. I don't know; it just makes for some tense dinners."

"Well I wish you luck too then," Sirius said as they approached the point they would have to turn away from each other. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he twisted his mouth and looked away. "Keep in touch, Sev," he finally said, "and good luck with your research. I'll..." he trailed off, and then pulled Severus into a loose hug. It was over before Severus could really process it, and Sirius had walked away, movements tight, before Severus had had the chance to respond.

+++++

I'm going to kill myself here sev

Please don't.

It would be a pain for Regulus to clean up.

god is there a middle finger emoji

Pleasant, Padfoot.

When do you move to NYC?

Five days. Right before New Years

And since im 21...

You'll be in bed by 8.

Yup 8 in the morning

U have any plans?

Lily and I are getting together.

But not much else.

Wish u could come with us

Yes, but I can't.

I don't turn 21 for another two weeks.

Its bullshit

ill get you a fake

I'm not breaking the law to watch you get plastered.

What else would u break the law for

But seriously

I'll go out with you when I'm legal.

Fine...

And in the meantime, don't kill yourself.

Will try my best

+++++

Severus stared hard at the test tube, his vision started to blur. He had been in lab for far too long, but in about hour, he would be able to complete this phase of the experiment, so he grit his teeth and continued.

He swirled the test tube, urging on the reaction and placed it in the rack. He turned back to the titration and grimaced. He gripped the knob with tense precision, added the calculated amount of milligrams and began to add drop by drop, his fingers strained. A drop or two over, and he would have to start the reaction over again, pushing him back another thirty minutes. He sorely did not want that to happen.

He focused hard on the mixture, noticed the first splash of pink, and managed to titrate it to the exact shade he had been aiming for. He pulled his hand away carefully and as he did, a knock sounded on the door, causing him to startle.

He almost knocked the knob and visualized in horror as the mixture bled pink but managed to step back gracefully enough that his solution remained intact.

He stared wide-eyed at the door. It was a Friday night, and relatively late for that matter. He was the only research assistant to ever opt to stay so late, and it would have to take an emergency to bring anyone else to the lab at this time. Nerves twisted in his stomach as nightmarish scenarios entered his head, and he tried to laugh at them, but it came out more like a wheeze.

The person knocked again, and Severus peeled off his gloves and lifted his safety goggles. He walked out of the wet lab and regarded the door. Rationally, he shouldn't open it. It could be a stranger, a threat, and anyone couldn't already access the lab already really had no business of being here. He stared at it warily, thinking.

"Hello?" he called out and heard a muffled reply.

"Severus," the person said, the voice familiar but in his tired state, he couldn't place it. "It's me. Let me in."

Severus stared at the door for a second longer and sighed. The person knew who he was, and they did have cameras if he did happen to get horribly murdered. He had also been doing titrations for the past hour and really didn't want to think anymore.

He reached out and opened the door and stared up at—

"Sirius," he said flabbergasted. Sirius grinned at him and stepped past into the lab. He wore dark blue jeans and a black sweater, and he looked like he had gotten a haircut, and he looked as he always did - mind-numbingly handsome.

"So this is where you've been all winter?" Sirius asked, walking past the work area and into the wet lab. Severus followed dumbly, too astonished to respond.

"What are you-what?" Severus managed, and Sirius paused from examining the vacuum filtration. He glanced up, and Severus had no idea what to make of him. They hadn't seen each other in

weeks, and while they texted frequently, it was hardly the same. And then to have Sirius show up one random Friday and stroll in like he belonged and without even a perfunctory hello.

He blinked hard and tried to gauge if the chemical fumes had distorted his perception of reality.

Sirius was quiet for a moment and then leaned against the worktable. "There was something wrong with the house, so I came back to check on it. Was walking by and wanted to see if you were here."

Severus closed his mouth and stood rigidly. "Okay," he said, his mind still correlated solely on chemical equations and mathematical formulas. Sirius simply did not compute in this equation, and he was too tired to shift his frame of mind. He still had two more reactions he needed to titrate and the filtration to finish and to clean up, and that was going to have to matter first.

He grabbed another set of gloves from the box and pulled them on. He pushed his safety goggles back down and returned to his workspace. He checked the reaction and poured it into an Erlenmeyer flask, setting up the next titration.

Sirius stared at him throughout it all. "Okay?" he finally said, the fluorescent lights harsh against his face.

Severus sighed. "I don't really know what you want here Sirius. And my brain right now is not going to be able to figure it out."

Sirius stared at him and straightened himself out. He walked around the island and sat on the tabletop behind Severus, so he was out of sight. Severus shook his head and quickly calculated the next titration.

"Anyway, how did you even find this lab? It's not like I ever told you," he asked and had the distant realization that he was too out of it to really monitor what he was saying. It wasn't like he had a lot of attention to spare, and he begrudgingly began the next titration. The lines of the tube started to blur, and he blinked hard.

"I looked it up," Sirius said, and Severus wanted to ask him how this would have been unplanned then.

The words should have caused some reaction from Severus, but he had caught sight of the first drops of pink and spent the next thirty seconds intensely focused on making sure he didn't fuck it up. Gratefully, Sirius waited.

"Oh," Severus finally responded, pulling out the next test tube. "It's certainly unexpected."

Sirius laughed softly. He muttered something under his breath, but Severus couldn't hear. "How long have you been here for?"

"Too long," Severus grimaced and repeated the procedure "I'm almost done though."

"Are you hungry?" Sirius asked. Severus had been, but then he had gotten too tired and just wanted to sleep, but he couldn't pass on this opportunity. He hoped Sirius didn't expect him to entertain him for the next few hours.

"Tired," he corrected. "But I could eat." He split the solution from the Erlenmeyer flask into separate test tubes, added the reagent, and covered the tops with tinfoil. The reaction would occur over the weekend, and he would pick it up on Monday. Sighing, he pulled off his goggles and began the familiar routine of lab cleanup.

Sirius asked to help, so Severus directed him to wash down the glassware. They cleaned in silence, and Severus knew he should probably ask something, but god damn he was exhausted. He had been sleeping worse than usual lately, and he felt on the brink of a cold.

He considered revoking his decision to join Sirius for food, but another part of him demanded he didn't, so he didn't say anything.

Severus pulled off his gloves, grimacing at the dampness, and shrugged off his lab coat. He gestured for Sirius to follow, pulled on his coat and scarf, and turned off the light so only the artificial glow of the computer monitor lit the room.

Sirius sidled up beside him, grabbed his coat, and stuffed his hands into its pockets.

"Where do you want to go?" Severus asked softly, appreciating the sudden darkness. It felt like a salve against his eyes, and he wished they could stay here, stuck in this moment.

However, if they did, Severus thought he might do something he would regret, and so he opened the door and began to walk along the deserted hallways to the entrance.

"That new pizza place?" Sirius offered, his voice quieter than Severus would have expected. He glanced over at him, eyebrow raised, but Sirius didn't notice.

"Sure," Severus agreed, not really caring where they went as long as it was quick. They left the building, and Severus winced at the cold, wrapping his arms around himself. The wind cut into his face and through the seams of his coat, and he shivered, teeth chattering.

No one spoke for a long moment, and Severus started to panic at the growing awkwardness. He glanced over at Sirius, who stared almost grimly ahead. His lips were pulled in a slight frown, and his shoulders looked tense. Severus thought he should ask, but he didn't really want to deal with something like that right now. So he decided on the easiest conversation.

"What's wrong with your house?" Severus asked, and Sirius startled, looking quickly at Severus.

"What?"

"Your house?" Severus repeated, staring confused at Sirius. It took a moment too long to click and then Sirius shrugged.

"Something with the pipes. I'm meeting with the landlord tomorrow," Sirius explained, digging his hands deeper into his pockets. They crossed the street, and Severus glanced at his dorm building as they walked past.

The moment to duck out passed, so Severus committed himself to dinner with Sirius. He only wished Sirius would do more to initiate conversation; he surely couldn't expect Severus to be able to do all the leg work.

However, Sirius remained silent, and Severus felt his heart begin to flutter in a jittery, sick sense. He swallowed hard and tried to move past his discomfort.

They reached Main Street and started to walk down it, and Severus couldn't stand it anymore. He didn't mind silence, but not an awkward, messed up silence where something desperately needed to be said.

"How's New York?" he asked quietly, voice muffled slightly by his scarf. Sirius glanced over at him again.

"It's good," he said, and Severus prayed for him to continue. Sirius scoffed and then laughed. "Actually, I kind of hate it. It feels dirty and cramped and like I can't breathe with all the buildings. And too many people."

"Thought you would like that?" Severus asked, flashing back to his memory of going to New York with Lily. He hadn't particularly liked it either, but she had, and despite his dislike, he could understand its appeal.

"Yeah, I don't know. It just feels lonely. But I have James there, and we've been having a good time, so that's been nice. Lots of bars," Sirius added, grinning and running a hand through his hair. "But yeah, I don't know."

Severus nodded, thinking of something to respond with, but then they were at the restaurant. They stood in line, the conversation cut short, and Severus opted for the cheapest pizza. The cashier did a double-take at Sirius, and Severus scowled in irritation because Sirius lapped the attention up and flirted lazily with her.

They set their coats on an open booth, and their orders were brought to them shortly after.

"Just cheese?" Sirius asked, pulling a face at Severus's pizza. Severus scowled and rolled his eyes.

"It's a classic," he countered, and Sirius gave him another skeptical look before picking up a slice that sagged with the weight of the toppings.

"Pineapple?" Severus grimaced, and Sirius raised his eyebrows at him midbite.

"You ever tried it?" Sirius asked between bites, and Severus shook his head. "Try it. You can't bash it until you do." He split another slice off the pizza and placed it on Severus's plate. Severus glared at him as he begrudgingly picked it up and took a bite. He chewed slowly and thoughtfully.

"And?"

"I may have been incorrect in my initial judgment," he acknowledged, and Sirius burst out in a laugh. The smile lingered on his face, and Severus felt warm under it.

"So," Sirius said, seeming to drag himself out of the weird funk. His eyes had brightened, and he seemed more relaxed.

"Yes?" Severus asked relieved. However, he couldn't dismiss his curiosity over Sirius's mood. He would have to see if it happened again.

"How's research?" Sirius asked, and Severus rubbed his hands together as he thought.

"Going. It's been a lot of work though."

"Found the cure for cancer yet?" he joked, and Severus rolled his eyes. Sirius stared at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to elaborate, which surprised Severus. People generally didn't care about Chemistry labs.

He took another bite of his pizza and then started to explain his research and his procedures, watching closely for Sirius's attention to begin to wane. Strangely, Sirius watched him closely throughout of all it, giving no indication of disinterest, so Severus continued, digging into some of the more complex elements of his work.

"That's pretty amazing, Sev," Sirius had said at the end of it, and he couldn't keep the small smile

off his face as a glow lit in his stomach.

"And you?" Severus asked. "Your internship?" he elaborated when Sirius stared at him confused.

"Oh, it's been good. I'm working with an organization that tries to free innocent men and women who have been wrongly imprisoned. It's disgusting seeing what's been done to some peoples. Years and years locked in a cell for a crime they never committed. They do good work there and the people are amazing," Sirius said, launching into more detail and growing passionate at the social wrongs. Severus listened closely at first, but then this exhaustion tore at his attention and he only managed to drink in his face and his expression and the way his lips moved when he talked, which all made him feel a little breathless.

He had to shake himself from it, eyes growing momentarily blearily. He needed to sleep, he thought. He should not be with Sirius Black right now.

"Are you okay?" Sirius asked softly, and Severus startled, staring at him with wide eyes. "Sorry, you just-I mean-."

"I'm fine," Severus cut in harshly. He must have phased out for a moment and felt a surge of irritation against himself. "Sorry," he said, relaxing and softening his tone. "I've just haven't really been sleeping well. And I-I'm pretty tired. Sorry, Padfoot."

Sirius stared at him, his expression unreadable for a moment. "Don't apologize, Sev. That's not-I was the one who barged in. How about we get you back to your dorm and we hang out sometime tomorrow? I-if you want," he finished meekly, and Severus stared at him for a moment, trying to make sense of it all.

"Okay," he agreed, and the tension on Sirius's face broke into a relieved grin. "What do you want to do?"

Sirius shrugged. "We'll figure something out. But let's get you back, okay?"

As if to prove the point, Severus yawned. "Yeah," he muttered, and Sirius stood to grab take away boxes, and as they stood to leave, Sirius reached over to grab Severus's scarf and looped it around his neck, hands brushing against the side of Severus's cheek, and Severus had to bite his lip to avoid saying or doing anything.

The moment felt full of something, something that hid in the sharp focus of Sirius's eyes, but Severus couldn't figure it out, and so he let the moment past. Sirius pulled on his coat and they left, stepping back into the cold.

Fortunately, they covered the distance back to Severus's dorm quickly and said their goodbyes and re-committed to their plans tomorrow, and Severus yawned deeply as if to illustrate his point, and then Sirius smiled, and his smile hid something too, but Severus couldn't think well enough to figure it out tonight.

He offered a small smile to Sirius and then swiped into his dorm, passing a few familiar faces before reaching his room, quickly getting ready for bed, and then stumbling to it to sleep his exhaustion away.

Chapter 7

Outside Sirius texted, and Severus smoothed out his hair, a sick knot of nerves clenching near his heart. He grabbed his coat, threw on his scarf, and suppressing an urge to look in the mirror, strode out the door.

He exited the building and glanced around, but Sirius was nowhere in sight, and Severus scowled. He glanced at his phone and sent a quick text, which Sirius responded to a few seconds later.

Around back.

Severus crumpled his brow and sighed. He glanced up at the brilliantly blue sky; it was one of those days of winter where everything felt oversaturated. He strolled around to the back and stumbled to a stop when he saw Sirius on a motorcycle.

Sirius wore dark jeans and a black leather jacket and haphazardly cradled a black helmet. His cheeks had flushed red, his black hair attractively tangled and he smiled wide, white teeth almost hurting Severus's eyes, and well, fuck.

Severus closed his mouth quickly when he realized he had started to gape, and he quickly thought of math problems he could solve so he wouldn't have to think of a sudden pooling of heat in his stomach. It was absurd, he thought, no one should ever look that good.

Sirius, in an even more flattering way, seemed ignorant of how he looked sitting there, and he gestured Severus over, smile widening.

Severus walked over and crossed his arms and did his best to convey annoyance at how Sirius had shown up. Sirius pretended to ignore it and reached around the bike to grab another helmet and throw it at Severus. He managed to catch it, letting out a surprised curse, which only caused Sirius to laugh.

"Climb on," Sirius said, and Severus scowled.

"I'm not trying to die today."

Sirius stared at him mock offense. "What? You have so little faith in me?" His eyes, bright and shining, betrayed the mockery, and Severus gripped harder on the helmet. He considered his options, but his heart told him to get on the motorcycle, broken bones be damned. And hell, he could always make Sirius pay for his medical bills if something did go terribly wrong.

"Yes," he responded coldly but then pulled on the helmet, grimacing at the sudden sense of enclosure. It didn't sit properly and jostled a bit, and Sirius reached over to press at a button or strap or something, and then it felt much better.

Severus climbed on the back of the motorcycle, a pit of anxiety turning in his stomach. He sat rigidly, uncertain of what to do, and Sirius had to twist at his hips to face him. He had put his helmet back on, so Severus could only really see his eyes through the open visor, and he thought about how gray they were, almost like steely water of a freezing ocean, and Severus thought he might drown in them.

Sirius grabbing his thigh and pulling him forward almost surprised him enough to tip off, but he managed to maintain his balance and scoot up so he practically pressed against Sirius, knees angling against the side of his thighs. His breath caught in his throat, and he struggled to swallow.

Then, Sirius grabbed on his elbow and pulled it around him, indicating that Severus's needed to hold him at the waist. And Severus did so, trying to keep his grip loose but then Sirius laughed, and used a gloved hand to pull Severus's arms tighter so that they were holding tightly onto the fabric of his stomach, and Severus's mind short-circuited for a moment when he realized he was right about his assumption that Sirius went to the gym.

Severus leaned into Sirius's heat, trying to keep his hands from trembling and he gasped at the cold, winter air.

"Good?" Sirius asked, and Severus muttered out a yes. Sirius started the motorcycle and then they were off, racing off into the wind, and the cold buffeted against him and the acceleration nearly knocking him off, except that his grip around Sirius kept him secure and warm and feeling safe despite the danger.

It was only as they nearly ran a red light and Severus felt his heart jump into his throat did he realize he had never asked Sirius where they were going and entertained the notion that Sirius was kidnapping him. His mind imagined the many places Sirius could be taking him, and there was no point asking over the sound of the engine.

It ended up just being the grocery store, and Severus didn't know if he should feel disappointed.

Sirius pulled into a space, cutting the engine and setting down the kickstand. Severus managed to take off his helmet and climb off, feet feeling shaky. His surroundings distorted at the sudden lack of speed, and he started to tip forward until Sirius's reached out and steadied his hand on his shoulder.

"First time, huh?" he asked, and Severus nodded. Sirius smiled. "Didn't kill you, did I?"

Severus scowled. "Not yet." Sirius huffed out a laugh, and they started to make their way to the storefront.

"I was thinking we could make dinner together," Sirius explained as they walked through the parking lot. "But then I realized I didn't have any food. So that's why we're here. Sounds good?"

"Dinner?" he asked, trying to notice any meaning in the word, but Sirius just shrugged.

"Don't like eating alone. So figured I'd kill two birds with one stone." His tone had notched back into casual apathy as if this meant nothing. Severus figured it probably didn't.

"Okay. What are we making?" Severus asked, and Sirius just shrugged again.

"Not sure. If you see anything..." Sirius left it open-ended, and Severus rubbed at his jaw, thinking.

"Do you cook often?"

Sirius laughed and shook his head. "Not really. I pretty much just do takeout. But thought we could do something different." Severus scowled, and when Sirius caught sight of it, he grinned in amusement. "Do you?" he followed up.

"Yes," Severus answered. He had cooked often with his mother, and when she had taken sick, he had picked up the main responsibilities. While initially, he had settled for easy dishes like pasta and rice, he generally had expanded his recipe list and found that he had a knack for cooking. He mentally scrolled through his list of recipes and settled on one that was easy and quick.

"But you live in a dorm?"

"I can cook at home," Severus said with condescension, and Sirius's grin slipped.

"Suppose so," he said, voice turning neutral. Severus bit at the inside of his lip; he didn't want to be an asshole. "What do you want to make then?"

"Chicken fajitas?" he offered, and Sirius agreed, grabbing a shopping cart. Severus quickly listed off what they needed, and they went off in the hunt for bell peppers and cilantro and pepper jack cheese. Sirius hummed underneath his breath as he went, asking questions over the ripeness of avocado and the cut of chicken, and Severus answered dutifully, staring in mild awe that someone could be twenty-one and still know so little.

It was almost like offering the idea of olive oil and garlic would blow Sirius's mind, and Severus figured if nothing else, he would teach Sirius how to actually feed himself.

Sirius found it amusing, Severus's growing exasperation until Severus started to suspect he had started to ask increasingly dumb questions just to rile him up. It annoyed him, but in a strangely comforting manner.

They finally found all they needed and Sirius grabbed a bottle of wine at which Severus rolled his eyes, and they checked out, Sirius flashing his credit card and ID. They helped bag the groceries, and Severus only then wondered how they were supposed to get them back to Sirius's place on his motorcycle. He didn't put it past Sirius to not have a plan either.

"Just hold them," Sirius said casually, handing the two bags of groceries over to a scowling Severus.

"I'm not falling off," he growled, and Sirius stared at him for a moment, helmet midway to his head.

"Don't worry. I won't let you," he comforted, and the words sunk heavily into Severus's skin but didn't help appease his worry. "Anyway if you do, the hospitals not that far."

"Fuck off, Black," Severus grimaced, and Sirius laughed at that, the sound bright and amused. His whole face lit up with it, and Severus wondered how much more of this his heart could tolerate.

"Climb on, loser," Sirius teased, and since the groceries bags had busied Severus's hands, Sirius reached over to grab the helmet and pull it gently onto Severus's head. He brushed away a strand of hair away as he did, and Severus felt the skin tingle with the touch, and he glanced downward quickly.

Even though Sirius drove like he needed to prove every stereotype of a reckless teenager, Severus did not fall off and even managed to get all the groceries into Sirius's kitchen in one piece.

He set the bags on the counter and glanced around, taking in the rooms that James, Remus, Peter,

and Sirius called their own. A few posters decorated the living room's walls – Severus noted a dramatic one with lions with an eye roll – and the couch looked worn and cozy, facing a large widescreen TV hooked into an X-box. However, since no one currently lived there, it felt empty and bare, a few spare items around but not much more. And for that matter, everything felt clean and nothing littered the floor or tables.

“You like?” Sirius asked, shrugging off the leather jacket to reveal a light gray sweater that Severus realized complemented his eyes perfectly. He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced as his hand caught on knots.

“It's nice,” Severus responded, beginning to unpack and organize the items.

“You've been here before,” Sirius said, jumping into the stool that lined the kitchen island. “Remember?”

Severus nodded, “Yes, that one party. It feels different now. But I like it. It would be a good place to live.”

“Yeah, it is,” Sirius reaffirmed, standing up and walking over to a cupboard to pull out two wine glasses. He unscrewed the wine cap and poured two glasses, handing one to Severus. Severus took it, but gripped it tightly, uncertain of what to do. Sirius stopped, stared closely at Severus as if trying to figure out what was wrong, and then slapped his face.

“Ah, fuck, I'm sorry. I forgot you don't drink at all. Shit, Sev, sorry.” Sirius reached to take Severus's glass back, and Severus shot him an apologetic look. He really would be willing to drink except for the fact that he had seen what it had done to his father, and for now, even a glass of wine felt like too much.

Maybe one day he would feel comfortable. But for now, especially in Sirius's house, he decided to err on the side of safety.

Sirius looked at his own and then dumped them both into the sink. Severus started to object, but Sirius cut him off. “My liver needs a break,” he explained, yet his eyes seemed to say more, and Severus had to look away quickly.

He refocused on the recipe; this he knew and could feel certain within. He asked for a cutting board and knife, and Sirius retrieved them dutifully. He directed Sirius to start slicing the bell peppers, having to provide a quick demonstration, and his apparent exasperation caused Sirius to huff out a laugh.

Sirius took to it quickly and began to cut the onions, and Severus turned to prepare the chicken, and Sirius started to ask him about his upcoming semester, and they fell into easy conversation over class schedules and professors and the general stresses of junior year.

Severus placed the ingredients into the oven and set the timer, and then helped Sirius finish off the salsa and add some lime to the sour cream and cut the jalapeños. Their hands would brush against each other as Severus grabbed from him the sharp-edged knife and handed him a serrated one for the tomatoes, and Sirius even grabbed at his waist at one point as he reached past him to open a drawer, and Severus had to close his eyes quickly at that.

When the oven timer dinged, Severus grabbed the tray, eyes running critically over the food. He approved of it and placed it on the stovetop, telling Sirius to grab the plates and tortilla shells. They plated their dinner as Sirius oohed and ahed over it, and Severus couldn't help himself from smiling at the lavish approval.

They sat down and began to eat, and Sirius's face went slack as he bit into it.

"Fuck, this is delicious," he moaned, and Severus smiled, looking down at his plate. "Can you cook for me every night?"

Severus scoffed, even though he was thinking he probably would. "It'd be better if I just taught you. You can't go through life on take out." He pulled a face, and Sirius laughed. They fell back into a comfortable silence as they enjoyed the meal, and Severus couldn't help but feel tiny bursts of pleasure at how much Sirius seemed to enjoy the fajita.

"So," Sirius finally said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. Severus finished his last bites and took a sip of water. "I-I'm glad to see you again."

"Me too. I haven't really seen anyone lately."

Sirius looked poised to say something, but then his face shuttered down and he leaned back. "Yeah, I bet. How's Lily doing? Her pictures look pretty amazing."

"She told me she almost died on a hiking trail yesterday, but other than that, she's doing great. She loves it there."

Sirius swirled his cup of water, and his reaction was more muted than Severus had expected. The knot of nerves in his chest tightened, and he took another sip of water to try not to think about it.

"How are you friends with her anyway?" Sirius asked, his voice guarded, and Severus furrowed his brow, unsure if he should act defensively. He didn't know what Sirius wanted or what this all meant.

"We've been friends with each other since we were like seven, I guess? We lived near each other, went to the same high school, and both ended up here. She's been my best friend for ages."

"Oh, okay," Sirius responded, gaze focused on the glass of water. His face had closed off, lips pulled slightly downward. "James thought you wanted to date her when they first started too. Or that you were harboring some years-long crush on her. I mean I could see why. She's gorgeous."

"I'm not-," Severus started to protest, placing his hands in his lap so he could hold them tightly. He didn't like where this was going and it made him feel uneasy. He suddenly yearned for that easy, meaningless conversation over classes where nothing really had to be said.

Sirius glanced up at him and shrugged with one shoulder. "That's just what he thought."

"Well, it's not true. I'm not-I do love her, you know? But like how you probably love James? Platonically. And she's not-she's not my type anyway," he said, the sentence skittering a little too close to the truth, and he hoped Sirius wouldn't press on it.

He wasn't that lucky.

"Oh? Really? Then what is your type?" Sirius asked as if he was trying too hard to act casual about it. Severus thought over a moment of what to say.

"Uh, dark-haired, I guess. On the taller side. Smart, um and kind. Especially kind." *Men*. He made sure not to say that last part, and he prayed Sirius wasn't telepathic. But if so, it was probably already too late for him anyway.

Sirius nodded, working his jaw. "She'll be a lucky girl," he finally said, almost spitting it out, and

Severus could only nod and agree. "You haven't got anyone, have you?"

"What? Oh, no. I don't," he said quickly, and he really wanted to change the topic but he didn't know how.

Sirius leaned back further in his chair, stretching his arms above his head. "Bella's trying to get back with me," he said, and Severus felt his mouth go sour.

"Oh," he managed to say.

"I don't think it's going to happen," Sirius said, and his tone grated on Severus's nerves. His emotions felt like they had been violently blended, and perhaps that's why he asked the next question.

"Is there someone new then?" The knot clenched even tighter and something heavy settled in the bottom of his stomach.

Sirius stared at him for a long beat. "Maybe."

"Oh, then I'm sure she'll be lucky too," he said, every neuron in his head misfiring in a cacophony of chaos.

"Yeah," Sirius agreed, voice soft and distant. Then he seemed to shake himself out of whatever he was in and grabbed both plates, standing up to put them in the dishwasher. It took him a long minute to speak again, but when he did, the moment of fragility had passed, and he was back to his normal self.

He suggested they watch a movie, and Severus didn't have anything better to do, so he agreed. They moved over to the couch, sitting next to each other, but fortunately, not touching. Severus focused on his breathing, trying to find a way to steady himself as he tried to process everything that had happened.

Sirius picked up the remote and started to scroll through Netflix, and they eventually decided on *Inception* because Severus had never seen it before and Sirius considered that a tragedy.

Sirius flicked off the lights, threw a blanket on Severus and took one for himself, and then started the movie.

He tried to explain at first, but Severus had hushed him and tried to puzzle through the convoluted plot himself. About half-way through, his exhaustion began to creep upon him, and he cursed himself for picking such a long movie. He tried to maintain his attention, but his eyelids started to gain weight, and he could feel himself start to nod off. He didn't want to insult Sirius so he remained sitting and tried to keep himself upright. He could feel his head begin to dip, and his mind started to give up on its fight, and with Leonardo DiCaprio saying something about a dream within a dream, he dozed off.

When he awoke, Sirius must have turned the TV off because the darkness blanketed the room, the only light a steady blink from the X-box and some streetlight through the window.

He found he had tucked himself tightly against Sirius, head resting in the crook of his shoulder. Sirius had looped an arm around him, hand resting on the shoulder furthest from him and fingers resting on his chest. He had also fallen asleep, head lolling sideways to rest atop of Severus's, and he breathed gently as he slumbered against Severus.

He realized with faint horror that one of his hands had dug itself into the fabric of Sirius's sweater

as if pulling him closer, and he unwrapped it quickly, jerking it back to his stomach. He also realized that their legs pressed gently against each other's, lost under the blankets.

Severus felt warm and comfortable, and he almost dozed off again, before a cold spike of horror wedged itself into his heart. He resisted the urge to jerk backward but couldn't steady his erratic breathing. Thoughts careened through his head, and Severus wanted to blame his dried out contacts for the sudden prickling of tears.

This couldn't happen. This couldn't *be* happening.

While he had slowly come to the realization that maybe he didn't hate Sirius Black as much as he did in the beginning and that he may even like him as in really *like* him, he never entertained the possibility of it meaning anything more.

It couldn't. That was the harsh truth of it.

Sirius Black was handsome and rich and a frat boy and straight. Oh, did he mention straight? As in Sirius Black only had an interest in the most beautiful girls at school? As in Sirius Black would look at him in disgust if he ever indicated that he wanted to sleep with him?

And Severus knew with a leaden pang of certainty that no matter how badly his heart might crave Sirius's affection, it was impossible and stupid and would only lead to a broken heart, not to mention the embarrassment and humiliation and just overall *pain*.

He didn't want that. He didn't want to live through that.

He had thought he had more control than he did. He thought he could put up those lines that would stop from tricking himself that this meant something more. And tonight clearly proved he couldn't.

Which meant he couldn't continue this. Not when he knew exactly where he would end up.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to cut out that knot of emotion that had sunk into his stomach and made him feel fluttery and sick. It didn't work, not when he was so close to Sirius that he noted that Sirius smelled clean and almost minty, but tonight, he would. Alone in his room, he would cut it out of him to save himself.

But now, he had to figure out a way to gracefully get out of this situation. He tried to sidle out from Sirius, scooting along the couch, but when Sirius's head dipped off, he let out a snort of surprise and his eyes opened.

"Huh?" he said, taking a moment to recollect his situation. He glanced over at Severus, and his eyes widened in understanding. "Fuck," he whispered, and then he swallowed hard and glanced down, and Severus did his best not to look at him.

"I must have fallen asleep," Severus said detachedly. He wanted to drench ice on his heart to still it.

"Yeah, me too," Sirius responded, sounding hoarse. He ran a hand through his hair and glanced over at Severus as if checking something. Severus avoided his gaze, instead admiring the fabric of the blanket. He could tell like Sirius was about to say something, but then he changed his mind and remained silent.

Severus couldn't stand it anymore. The humiliation would pick apart his organs with agonizing accuracy, and he suddenly yearned to be alone. He couldn't stand the thought of Sirius Black anymore.

"I should probably get back," he said, clearing his throat.

"Yeah, yeah," Sirius agreed, nodding too many times, and then he stood, pushing the blanket off him. "C'mon, I'll drive you home."

"You don't have to," Severus started to protest, but Sirius shook his head.

"It's the least I can do. Anyway, I like riding at night."

"It's cold," Severus protested weakly, and Sirius shrugged. His face remained grim, eyes turned inward, and he rubbed at his jaw. Severus figured it would be easiest not to argue, so he grabbed his coat and scarf, and Sirius took the keys from the counter.

They didn't say another word to each other, and Severus hated how he had to wrap his arms around Sirius's waist and press his knees against his thighs, and then he thought about how this would probably be the last time he touched Sirius so intimately, and then he felt sad and scared that he did.

The wind cut against him so that it was almost painful, and the cold stole the breath from his lips, but it helped alleviate the agonizing inner turmoil, and he wanted to yell at Sirius to go faster and faster and never stop.

But he didn't, and then they were at Severus's dorm, and Severus climbed off, pulling off the helmet and handing it back to Sirius.

"See you around," Sirius had said quickly as if the words tasted sour in his mouth, and Severus had responded with a weak yeah and a goodnight and then he walked back to his dorm.

He heard Sirius take off behind him with an angry rev of the engine, and Severus walked quicker, rubbing with frustration at his eyes because he really did not want to cry over Sirius Black.

It did no good, and he fell asleep that night against a damp pillow.

Chapter 8

Hey, you want to get lunch before I leave

Just something quick

I would, but I'm supposed to meet with someone from my lab.

On Sunday afternoon?

Yes. Sorry.

U sure?

Yes, sorry

It's about my thesis

Ok, well then nevermind

See you around, Sev

Have fun in New York, Sirius.

thanks

+++++

Hi Sev!

Hi Lily

How's Queenstown?

Amazing

I'm going to move here

We're supposed to go skydiving tomorrow

Please make sure they double check the parachutes.

Except I suppose that would be a remarkable place to die.

Haha I'll be fine

I hope

Anyway James told me that Sirius came down and saw you?

Yes, he did

Oh, well how was that?

Fine.

We just made dinner together and watched a movie.

Oh?

It wasn't like that, Lily.

Nothing happened.

"Sev?"

"Lily, what time is it there? Why are you calling me?"

"Because I wanted to ask you something. And I didn't want to text you it. Oh, and it's almost noon."

"What?"

"Did you want something to happen?"

"Lily..."

"Seriously, Sev. It's not bad if you did, I just want to know."

"I..."

"Yeah?"

"I...I don't...It doesn't matter."

"Of course it does. Why wouldn't it?"

"Because nothing will ever happen even if I wanted it to. So it's better just not to worry about it."

"You like him then?"

"Lily..."

“Sev, it’s okay if you do. He...like I get it. I do, okay? So that’s a yes then?”

“I don’t want to.”

Lily laughed. “Yeah, we don’t always get what we want.”

“Don’t tell your boyfriend.”

“Don’t worry, Sev. I...oh shit, they want us to go. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay, love you, Sev.”

“Love you too, Lily.”

+++++

James, we need to talk. ASAP.

Is this what I think it is babe?

Yes.

We’ve got to figure out what to do.

I know, you try living with him

When are you done with that excursion?

I can call you

We should be back at the hostel at 5

So like noon for you?

Sounds good.

Love you, Lils.

Love you too

+++++

“How’s high the likelihood you’ll come to the KSE party with me tonight?” Lily asked, glancing up from her phone to look at Severus.

Severus sighed and finished typing an email on his laptop. “We have class tomorrow.”

Lily smiled guilty and shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s sylly week. And we can always leave on the earlier side,” she modified.

“You’ll be leaving with James,” Severus corrected, and Lily kicked him from underneath the table.

“Sirius will be there,” she teased, and Severus shot her a sour look. “Oh come on, we don’t know that he doesn’t like you.”

“Yes, we do,” Severus said firmly. “Anyway, he told me there’s someone else he’s interested in, okay Lily? So don’t get any ideas.”

Lily looked pose to argue but then tilted her head and crinkled her face in confusion “Who?” she asked. “I haven’t heard anything.”

“He...he didn’t say who, but it’s certainly not me. Seeing as she’s a female.”

Lily thought for a moment longer, “Really?” she said skeptically. “I really haven’t heard anything. And usually stuff like that gets around fast between KSE groupies.”

“That’s what he told me. I don’t know else what to say,” he said, his voice taking a turn to defensive. Lily thought for another long beat.

“Okay, well I’ll have to ask James then. I’m just curious who this mystery person is. But you are coming tonight, right?” she cajoled, and Severus’s scowl deepened.

“Fine,” he muttered. “But I am going to leave early, okay? I have Inorganic Chemistry at nine tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, you’re not going to miss Inorganic Chemistry. Ugh, Sev, that sounds terrible. Isn’t organic bad enough already? And now you have to add the in- to it?”

Severus huffed out a laugh. “Yes. Unfortunately.”

Lily smiled at him, and Severus suddenly felt relieved that she was back from New Zealand. He had missed her in her month of absence, and she helped ease his doubt and anxiety. No matter what happened with Sirius Black, she would be there on his side. He had always thought she was the kindest person he had ever met, someone truly good at heart, and he had yet to see any evidence proving otherwise.

James was a lucky bastard, he thought. In fact, they were all lucky bastards when it came to Lily Evans.

He pulled himself from his thoughts and turned back to his email. A pit of dread opened in his stomach when he thought that in all likelihood he would see Sirius tonight and considered the countless directions their conversation might go and thought that maybe they might kiss and then immediately quashed the thought from his head.

He had promised himself not to let Sirius affect him anymore. He would no longer entertain thoughts of anything developing past their haphazard sense of friendship. He had to protect himself. Unfortunately, his stupid, irrational heart ignored the logic of his mind, leaving him in a predicament he didn’t know how to get out of.

Maybe tonight would offer some clarity. Provide some excuse to move on. Or, as his heart sung to him and his mind ordered it to stay silent, they would confess their attraction and kiss and Sirius would *look* at him and-

“You want to go get lunch? I’m starving.” Lily asked, interrupting Severus’s thoughts. He stared dumbly at her for a moment trying to process her words and then nodded.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and they put their things into their backpacks and left the student center together, shivering against the gray February air.

+++++

The party was loud and disruptive, girls swarming in as KSE brothers lost their minds. Severus felt dizzy and sick from the activity, especially with the hyper-awareness of seeing Sirius at any moment, and he decided he needed to slip outside.

He had started to yell the words at Lily who looked just as fed up as he did, but then she finally caught sight of James. She grabbed Severus's arm and yanked him through the crowd, pulling him up to James, Peter, Frank, Remus, and oh-

"Hey," Sirius said, the word coming out as a sharp exhale, and Severus stared up at him, words drying in his mouth.

"Hey," he managed to force out, blinking hard but maintaining the gaze. He had the irrational idea to reach out right there and kiss Sirius until their mouths ached.

Then Remus had reached forward, almost stumbling over his feet, and pulled Severus into a one-arm hug and said how he had missed him. Overwhelmed, Severus turned away from Sirius to handle the tipsy Remus who smiled lopsidedly at him.

"I missed you, man. All you guys. So glad you're back," Remus yelled into his ear, and Severus smiled back at him, trying to hold his hand on his shoulder and steady him. Remus turned away, reaching for Sirius, who stared at him amused.

Severus said his hellos to Peter and Frank, who both nursed drinks and responded with a casual friendliness. Someone suddenly turned the music up and the chatter grew louder, so Severus could barely hear anything except Drake and an indistinguishable hum of voices. He turned to Sirius, gesturing that he wanted a smoke, and Sirius mouthed something back at him, which Severus took as a yes.

Another brother bumped into him, pushing him forward, and Sirius reached out to catch him, hands firm on his arms. They rested there a moment too long, and Severus glanced downwards, unable to meet his gaze. He struggled to breathe and knew he needed to get outside. They had let far too many people in, and his anxiety had kicked into full notch at the overwhelming noise and smell and pressure.

Severus tried to yell something at Lily so she would understand, and she tried to yell something back. She eventually gave up, looking frustrated, and grabbed at Severus and James to pull them back the way they came. Severus stumbled forward with her and with a sharp intake of breath, felt Sirius's grab him around his wrist so that he could follow them through the swarm also.

After what felt like far too long, they finally emerged outback, and Lily let out a string of curses. "Did they not get the memo to not let half the school in? I couldn't breathe in there."

James grimaced and scratched at the back of his head. "I know, I know. We'll tell them next time to cap it." He turned to Sirius, Remus, Frank, and Peter. They had somehow also made it out. "You just want to head back to our place? You can stay if you guys want, but I'm not feeling it tonight."

Sirius snorted. "Thought you'd never ask. I'd much rather just get drunk at our place." Lily rolled her eyes but smiled at it, and Sirius grinned back at her. "Oh, don't look at me like that, princess," he teased, and Lily pulled a face.

"Don't call me a princess," she protested, and James threw an arm around her and pressed a kiss against the side of her head.

"We all know she's the queen anyway," James said, mushing his face against her head, and Lily

pulled another face but laughed, eyes bright. Remus nodded in full-hearted agreement, almost falling forward with the force of it, and Sirius had to steady him again. Peter whispered something to Frank, who let out a snort of laughter. "Okay, sounds like a plan, guys," he established, and Severus took it as his cue to leave.

It was a shame; he hoped he would have had time to talk with Sirius. But perhaps this was the best option of all – to go to bed and sleep it off.

Before he could say his goodbyes, Sirius turned to him. "You coming?"

"Oh, I mean, I don't need to," Severus countered quickly. They were surely only doing it to be nice and expected him to dip out as gracefully as possible. Even though he sometimes missed social cues, he wouldn't embarrass himself this time.

"Yup, he's coming," Lily said brightly, grabbing Severus's arm. "He's my best friend." She turned to look at James, and her smile widened. "My two favorite people."

James laughed gently at that, looking at her in a way that did nothing to hide his love, and Severus couldn't stop the small smile from spreading across his face.

Frank muttered something to Peter, and James looked at him. "Huh?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I was just saying that you've got to watch out. Looks like you have some competition," he said sheepishly, and Lily threw her hands up and groaned.

"How many times do I have to tell you guys it's not like that? And it's not even like Severus would ever want that? And like I love, *love* James. Okay?" she said exasperated, and Severus froze a little when he thought about how Lily had said that. He prayed no one else had noticed.

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry," Frank said, raising his hands and smiling. He seemed to carry no ill intent, and Lily let it go. Peter looked less than amused, and Sirius had a contemplative expression on his face as if he had also caught the second meaning behind Lily's words.

"Fuck, it's cold," Remus said as if the thought had suddenly struck him. He wrapped his arms around his chest and started to rock on his feet. Sirius rolled his eyes, reached out to wrap an arm around Remus's shoulders, and pulled him into his side as if to share his warmth. Remus muttered his thanks, and they all took it as the cue to head back to their place.

Luckily, they lived nearby, and they set off along the tree-lined sidewalk. They walked in a loose group, and Severus hovered near the side of it, feeling terribly out of place. He wasn't one of them, he kept thinking. They only kept him around because of Lily.

While Frank seemed to be a nice guy, he clearly didn't know how to handle someone like Severus and besides a few cursory remarks, had typically ignored him as one did to an outsider strung around with a tight-knit group of friends. Peter, though, didn't seem to like him very much. Severus didn't know exactly why. He could only speculate on the root of Peter's disdain.

Remus did seem to like him, quite a bit actually, and he was currently trying to rope him into an argument he had started with Sirius over something political. Severus selected a carefully neutral response, and Sirius winked at him over it, which caused the cursed butterflies to start a racket in his stomach.

James joked with them, looking backward to flash a teasing smile, and Remus threw up his hands in exasperation when everyone seemed to stop listening to him. Sirius laughed, roughly pulling Remus against him and playing off James as if their friendship was the most natural, easiest thing

in the world.

They arrived at their house only a few minutes later, and James fumbled for his key. He let them in and flicked on the lights. Sirius headed straight for the minifridge, pulling out a bottle of whiskey and smiled dangerously.

He clearly found the approval he wanted because he uncapped the bottle and took a swig from it, wiping the residue liquid from his lips and grimacing.

“That’s tough,” he muttered and then handed it to Peter who did the same, coughing at the end of it.

“You guys want to play a drinking game?” James suggested, taking a seat on the couch and stretching his arms over his head. Lily sat down next to him, and after an awkward beat, Severus sat next to her.

He figured they could sense his discomfort coming off him in waves, and he did his best to hide it. Anyway, Sirius had invited him here and James had warmed up to him, and he needed to stop overthinking it.

“Never Have I Ever!” Remus called from the kitchen, hand deep in a bag of tortilla chips.

Sirius snorted. “Yeah, but we already know everything about each other.”

“Truth or Dare?” Remus tried, voice muffled through a mouthful of chips.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Peter seconded, and Frank responded in kind. Sirius shrugged and exchanged an amused look with James.

“That okay with you, Sev?” Sirius asked, taking a seat in the armchair next to him. He kicked his legs up on the small table, and Severus suddenly flashed back to the last time they had spent time together here. How they had woken up next to each other and...

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Severus agreed, figuring he could play it alright. He could always lie if it became too uncomfortable.

“Yeah, and then if you aren’t willing to do it, you’ve gotta drink,” James added, and they all agreed. Everyone sat in a circle, Remus on the ground with his back pressed against the TV stand and Peter and Frank on the second smaller couch. “Okay, who wants to start?”

“I will,” Sirius offered, lounging back in his chair. He arched an eyebrow as if daring them.

“Okay, well then truth or dare?” James continued.

“Truth,” Sirius decided, and Severus figured there were a lot of things he wanted to ask him. He decided to remain quiet.

“Umm, can I ask?” Remus said, and when no one stopped him, he continued. “Best and worst sex. Go.” Severus felt his mouth suddenly go very dry.

“You can only ask one,” Sirius said lightly, eyes glinting in amusement, and Remus shrugged. “Fine. Best sex is probably with...I think it’s got to be with Bella. She’s fucking crazy in bed.”

“Then get back with her,” Peter said, smiling and sounding almost too casual. “If she’s so good.”

“Nah,” Sirius responded nonchalantly, and Peter's smile looked a little too forced.

“And worst?” Remus cut in, and Sirius pretended to think for a moment. He looked poised to answer, and then he glanced briefly over at Severus and their eyes met. Severus knew the answer, remembered holding Sirius on that cold night in December, and he figured Sirius would lie. That’s what he would do.

Sirius instead reached for the bottle of whiskey and took another sip, closing his eyes after it. “That’s powerful whiskey. Okay, next person,” he continued, and it had to be either Severus or Remus. Thankfully, Remus took it as his turn.

“Truth,” he said boldly, and Frank jumped in.

“Who do you like least in this room?” he asked, and Remus snorted. Severus sucked at his cheeks and tried to prepare himself for the inevitability of his name.

“Easy. Sirius,” Remus confessed, and Sirius kicked at him and flipped him off. James laughed and muttered something about not disagreeing, which caused Sirius to flip him off too. However, the exchange seemed good-natured, if their smiles indicated anything.

“Okay, Peter?” James asked, turning to him.

“Dare,” Peter said with a smirk, and Lily took a turn.

“Talk in an accent for the rest of the game,” she offered, and Peter grimaced.

“Oy, unfair,” he said in a terrible British accent. Frank snorted at it.

“My turn, uh, truth?” Frank said.

“You got a crush on anyone?” Sirius asked, kicking his legs up again on the table. He tilted his head, watching him.

Frank blushed. “Um, Alice is pretty awesome,” he admitted.

“Thought so,” Sirius followed. “Don’t worry, mate, we’ll get you sorted out.” James nodded, and Remus smiled encouragingly, taking another handful of chips.

“James?”

James sighed, “Dare.”

“Call a Chinese restaurant and order a pizza. On speaker,” Peter offered, butchering the vowels as he tried to mimic Anglos, and the room was silent a split second until bursting out in laughter.

“Shit,” Lily said, “I was going to have him take his shirt off, but yours is better.”

What followed was a five-minute debacle that left them in hysterics as James tried to explain that he wanted a *pizza*, not chow mein, and he ended the call trying to smother his own laughter.

“Lily?” Remus pushed on when the laughter subsided, and Lily paused a moment, debating her options.

“Truth,” she settled on.

“How many orgasms have you faked with James?” Sirius asked quickly, and he grinned, eyes glinting with self-satisfied amusement.

“Oh, fuck you,” James cursed, and Lily laughed.

“Surprisingly few,” she answered, leaning against James.

“Still some though,” Sirius clarified, but his voice contained no malice. Lily laughed along with it, and Severus thought how so often he seemed like an asshole but constantly surprised people with the depth of his heart.

Then it was Severus’s turn, and he tried to suppress a surge of anxiety. However, he had missed his chance to opt out of the game and swallowed his unease. “Truth,” he said, not wanting to see what they would make him do.

“If you’d got to have sex with one person in this room, who’d it be?” James asked, cutting off something Peter was about to say, “And no worries if it’s my girlfriend.”

“James!” Lily exclaimed, swatting at his arm.

“What?” James said sheepishly and then turned back to Severus. “So?”

Severus thought, trying not to think of Sirius sitting beside him. There was one clear answer, but would saying it suggest too much? Would Sirius realize and turn to him in disgust, and he would have to flee in shame? But if he said Lily or James or Remus, then what would Sirius think? He imagined Sirius saying he would rather fuck Remus or James over him, and it felt like someone had driven a stake into his heart. He could say nothing, but wouldn’t that be more suspicious?

Or he could play it off and say Sirius and pretend it didn’t mean much? Just that he wouldn’t want to have sex with his childhood friend and that there was no one else?

“Is it bad that I kind of want him to say me?” Remus asked, smiling lopsidedly from the floor.

“That’s your ego,” Sirius explained, his tone a fraction off, and there wasn’t any point in pretending, was there? No one else compared to someone like Sirius Black.

“I suppose,” Severus began, drawing out the words, “I suppose it would be Sirius,” he said, the words causing a hot thread of boldness to run through him, and he felt almost lightheaded with it. “Sorry, Lils,” he continued because no one else spoke. “I just...part of you is still that seven-year-old girl I first met, so I can’t really think of you like that. Oh, and sorry Remus,” he added, fumbling, and someone needed to shut him up.

He glanced down so he didn’t have to see anyone’s reaction and so no one could see his. Sirius laughed, but it was a low, gruff sound.

“Didn’t know you liked me like that,” Sirius teased, the alcohol weighing down his words so they came off heavier than he had probably intended. Severus shrugged, unable to speak or look at him. “Suck it, Remus,” he added, and Remus flipped him off.

“Okay, fine. Next one. Sirius?” Remus pushed on. Sirius took a moment to respond, and Severus hoped they would quickly move past his admission.

“Uh, dare,” Sirius decided, seeming to startle from something.

“Okay,” Remus said cheekily, “*I dare* you to kiss Severus. And like make it a good one, not one of those half-measure kisses or anything.”

Severus felt all the air leave the room in one fell swoop, his stomach heating in anticipation at the

thought of Sirius leaning in further and further, but then dread settled on his shoulders as he waited for Sirius to respond. He wasn't sure he could handle the rejection; to do so would be to rip out his heart.

Lily had tensed at the question, and James had sobered, looking closely at Sirius. Frank and Peter seemed to notice no difference, even as the seconds stretched out until it started to become uncomfortable.

"Sirius?" Remus pressured, and Sirius ran his hands down his pants.

"No," he said thickly, and then in a deft movement that felt like a physical punch to Severus's stomach, he reached for the whiskey and took a long drink.

The room seemed to freeze, at least that's how it seemed to Severus as hot, pulsing shame coursed through him, and he detachedly thought of things that would hurt less than being so publicly rejected by Sirius. Getting hit by a car? Yes. Getting thrown off of Sirius's motorbike and breaking every bone in his body? Definitely. Drowning? Setting himself on fire? He didn't think they would come close to the feeling of his heart being ripped out and trampled on.

His fingers itched to sink a razor in the skin of his forearm, and a wild surge of panic crashed over him because he had managed to kick that bad habit since high school and he really, *really* did not want to fall back into it.

What he did need was to getaway. He could no longer sit in this suffocating room and face his considerable lack of worth and appeal. He couldn't sit beside the person he had fallen for as they practically shit on him. He figured it would look like he was fleeing, a victim of embarrassment, but he didn't particularly care.

Everything else seemed to pale when placed next to the thought that *Sirius Black did not want to kiss him*. Not even as a dare in a stupid drinking game. Not even in a way that held no significance or meant anything, was just a stupid dare from a drunk friend.

He swallowed a laugh; if it came out, it would sound broken and desperate, and he didn't want to hear himself like that. Instead, he muttered out something about wanting a cigarette and walked out as slowly as he could, smothering his need to run.

Remus started to speak behind him, but then Severus had slipped outside and he gulped at the cold air. With trembling fingers, he pulled out his pack and lit a cigarette. His eyes burned, but he wouldn't cry, not here.

The world blurred before him momentarily, and he rubbed at his eyes angrily, taking a long drag from the cigarette and coughing violently as the smoke hit him wrong. He wrapped another arm around his chest, holding himself tightly and felt grateful for the cold that cut into him like a scalpel. It helped distract from the torment in his chest.

The door beside him opened, and Severus couldn't hide his flinch. He desperately turned his face into an apathetic mask when he saw it was Sirius. He took another drag, this time keeping his hands steady and arching an eyebrow as if to question Sirius's presence, as if to ask why he should care.

"I-I didn't mean it like that. I-I'm sorry," Sirius said, and Severus noticed an anguish in his eyes, as if this had also hurt him badly. Severus wondered in a very distant sense why this would be the case. Sirius Black would never care for him like that.

"It's fine," Severus responded, keeping his voice cold. After years of bullying in middle and high school, he had learned how to hide his emotions and reactions. He was grateful for that skill tonight.

"No-no, I don't think," Sirius protested and then rage swelled inside Severus as he thought about how Sirius thought he could treat him like this. How he must pity the ugly poor boy. How even though he had extended some friendship, it surely stemmed from pity and guilt over his advantaged position in life, and how even his pity couldn't extend so far as to kiss Severus for the briefest of seconds. To kiss him in a way that meant nothing, would never mean anything.

"I said it's fine," Severus hissed, straightening himself up. The cigarette crumpled between his fingers, and he threw it on the ground.

"Severus-," Sirius tried again, and Severus couldn't help but laugh, hiding his bitterness underneath cruelty. What a fucking shit show of a night. And all he had wanted to do was smoke a cigarette with Sirius.

"It's not like I would even want you to kiss me anyway," Severus sneered, allowing disdain and disgust to filter through his voice. A small voice told him to stop, to listen, but a much louder, angrier voice told it to shut up. He had allowed himself to get too vulnerable and now he would suffer for that mistake. But he knew how to protect himself in a blanket of sarcasm and sneers and snarls. He knew how to look like he didn't care, knew how to direct the pain out of him into others, knew how to hide his weakness.

He could thank Lucius for that. And those childhood bullies who targeted him because he was poor and weird. And his father who drank far too much and who expected a certain son out of him.

Sirius blinked rapidly. "Oh, oh," he repeated dumbly, swallowing hard. Severus stared hard at the ground. "Oh, I see. Umm, then, yeah. That's good cause I didn't want to kiss you either," Sirius responded, his voice gaining a steely edge when he regained his stride. Severus stayed quiet as he listened to his heart scream.

"Fuck you, Black," he snarled, and when he met Sirius's gaze one final time, it was like looking at his reflection. The thought tore into him, shredding his heart. He walked away as quickly as he could, unable to bear it any longer, and only broke into a run when he didn't think Sirius could see him anymore.

He ran until he couldn't breathe and then he stumbled to his room and knew he either needed to break everything in his room or cry and because he was poor and had nothing else, he decided to cry.

Chapter 9

Lily, please, please talk to him.

I can't watch him do this anymore

Is he still?

Trying to fuck and drug himself to death?

He's self-destructing

And I can't watch it

Is Bellatrix still over at ur house?

Never leaves

She's not a good person Lils

I know

Okay, okay, I'll talk to him

He's really torn up about it

He doesn't like people like that ever

And then for that...

God, I know Remus was an idiot

I just wanted to give Sirius some courage

Not to watch that

I know, James

None of us wanted that

We'll figure something out, okay?

We need to.

+++++

"Severus," Lily began, "do you think we could talk?" She glanced over at him, and Severus scowled.

"About what?" he said, keeping his voice neutral.

"About, you know, about Sirius," Lily continued, and her pace quickened a notch. Severus continued in stride, keeping his face reserved. Shortly, he would be in class and this conversation forgotten.

"There's nothing to say," he said, stripping the emotion from his voice. He had too if he wanted to convince Lily that there *was* nothing to say.

"Um, yeah, I..." Lily fumbled.

"Lily, we already talked about this," Severus interrupted, thinking back to their conversation the following morning about how Sirius Black was and always would be an asshole and that Severus deserved better and all the typical assurances. For the past three weeks, he had done his absolute best to keep Sirius out of his thoughts, and while he hadn't been successful, he had reclaimed some semblance of normality.

"Yeah, I know," Lily pushed on. "But is there any chance you would...um, talk to him again?"

"No," Severus replied bluntly. Black would mock him and laugh at him, and he had already self-flagellated himself enough. It was better for everyone if he moved on; Sirius Black would start to date the person he had mentioned in January who probably was very pretty and Severus could continue with school and getting into his desired Master's program.

"Sev," Lily tried again, but Severus shook his head harshly.

"No, Lily. I'm sorry. It's over, and there's no point continuing," Severus explained, and the words were true enough, he supposed.

"I...but," Lily continued, the words seeming jammed in her throat. Severus figured he should listen to her; she truly did know best. However, there was no point. Black had made it abundantly clear nothing existed between the two of them, and he wouldn't delude himself otherwise.

Luckily, they reached the building before Lily could find the words, and Severus muttered his goodbyes and broke off, hoping that a lecture on spectroscopy would quell his nerves and smother the heartbreak.

+++++

Hey Sev

I'm having a bday party this Saturday

Would love to have you there J

Sounds good, Reggie.

I'll be there.

Perfect!

And bring Lily too

Also u still friends with my brother?

No, not particularly.

And yes, of course, Lily will love to come.

Oh, that's too bad

He seemed like he really liked you

But he's also an asshole so I get it

Yes.

Thank you for the invite.

Of course!

+++++

Severus arrived at Regulus's party alone, buzzing in at the apartment door. Someone unlocked the door, and he entered, climbing up the stairs and locating the apartment.

Lily had spent the day with James and had texted that she would meet him there. It followed that James's would also attend, which meant that Sirius would probably tag along, especially given that it was his brother. However, Severus had spent the afternoon preparing for such an event. In the case of interacting with Sirius again, he would lean into his sarcasm and coldness and prove that Sirius's lack of interest meant nothing to him. He would no longer allow vulnerability. Yet, he still hoped he didn't have to see him. The wound was still raw, no matter what he pretended.

He knocked on the apartment door, and Regulus opened it, smiling.

"Hey, Sev. How are you?" he asked, and Severus noted grimly that he was one of the first to arrive. He had yet to figure out how the timing of college parties worked and usually relied on Lily to match social expectations.

"I'm good, and you?" he asked.

"Good, good, come on in," Regulus gestured, and Severus followed him into the living room. The other roommates greeted him, and Severus exchanged a few words with them before turning back to Regulus.

"I got you gift," he said, pulling out a small box from his coat pocket. "I hope it's appropriate," he continued awkwardly, and Regulus broke into a huge grin.

"Thank you, Sev. Oh my god, this is really nice of you," he gushed, taking the gift. He unwrapped it quickly and fell silent when he saw the gift. "Dude, is that a Theia RDV2?"

Severus nodded, unsure of what to make of the reaction. "I remember you mentioning it once. If you have one already, I can return it."

"I-no, I don't have one. But I've been wanting one for ages. Jesus, Sev, you really didn't have to do this much."

"You've been a good friend, Reggie," Severus said quietly, the gratitude making him uncomfortable. "Just promise not to hack me, okay?"

Regulus laughed, smiling wide. "Of course not. But if you ever need me to get some dirt on someone, just give me a call. You're a good friend too, Sev."

Severus offered a small smile, and Regulus pulled him into a hug.

"Okay, I've got to put this upstairs. You can come if you want?" Regulus asked as he broke off the hug. Severus's arms hung awkwardly by his side, and since he didn't really know the other roommates that well, he followed Regulus up the staircase.

Regulus's room was immaculate, except for his desk that contained a haphazard array of hardware. He placed the Theia RDV2 on one of the neater shelves and thanked Severus again. He looked as if he was about to say something else but then changed his mind, and they headed back downstairs.

Luckily, at that point, more people had started to arrive. As they wished Regulus a happy birthday, Severus slipped away to the couch and waited for someone he knew to arrive. Unfortunately, a lot of their mutual friends had known Severus during his freshman year, and while they weren't unfriendly, there still existed a barrier that Severus had yet to overcome.

Someone handed him a drink, and he cradled it. He watched the house party start to build and listened to the music, and a pretty girl with thick brown hair had come over at one point and started to talk to him. The conversation was nice, and Severus thought how much better it would be if he liked girls. At least, his intentions would be obvious and he wouldn't get his heartbroken over arrogant frat boys. He wondered if some callous frat boy had done the same to her, and he felt bonded with her over her in mutual empathy.

About an hour passed before Lily arrived, James in tow. She hugged Regulus, profusely wishing him happy birthday. Then she spotted Severus and made a beeline over to him.

She sat next to the pretty brown haired girl whose name was Marlene and introduced herself, and she enthusiastically joined their conversation. James sat beside her, offering a smile in greeting but otherwise seeming out of it. He looked tired, and Severus almost wanted to ask what was wrong.

Marlene turned out to be insightful and funny, and Severus realized he was enjoying himself. He felt happy and buzzed on the atmosphere, and Lily and Marlene made him feel appreciated. It felt much better than those shitty nights outside of KSE. Only James seemed not to enjoy it. He looked lost in his thoughts and sipped bitterly at his drink. Lily glanced over at him in concern, but James shrugged it off.

Severus figured another thirty minutes of this or so and then he would leave comfortably and relatively happy. He had needed a night like this. One without the emotional roller coaster that felt like the track had fallen off and sent him hurtling into the air.

However, as he thought of it, the universe decided to play a cruel joke on him and take his lovely night and properly fuck it up.

"Shit," James muttered, and they all glanced towards the door to see the hallway light frame Sirius

Black, who looked absurdly handsome in a leather jacket and tight black jeans, and Bellatrix Lestranger, who could easily be mistaken as a Victoria Secret's model.

Severus bitterly thought about how good they looked with each other. Then he thought of how pitiful he would look on Sirius's arm as if a literal god had stooped for the scum of the earth, and he was very tempted to take a drink from the cup.

Sirius careened over to Regulus, breaking through the group and sucking up all the attention as he always did. Bellatrix followed behind him, giggling as she drew everyone man's gaze. He pulled Regulus into a tight hug and then reached behind him for the bottle of tequila and poured out three shots. Regulus looked sheepish but followed along, and then Sirius took another for good measure and poured a generous amount into a red solo cup, opening the fridge to grab some orange juice.

The fact that Sirius was back with Bellatrix threatened to dislodge something near his heart, and he stamped down on it quickly. It was fine - Bellatrix was beautiful and popular, and it didn't make a difference to him. It didn't matter anyway; it's not like he cared who Sirius wanted to be with.

Severus tried to pull his attention away and back to Marlene, but she also stared transfixed at Sirius. Lily noticed his efforts, and they shakily broke into a conversation about their irritation over campus construction. It didn't last long because Sirius spotted James, and pulling Bellatrix behind him, walked over their corner of the room.

"Hey," Sirius slurred, and Severus had to resist the urge to take the cup from him because he already seemed far too drunk then what could be healthy. James picked up on it too.

"Hey, mate. You sure you want to drink that much?" he asked, and Sirius blinked at him.

"Yeah, mate. I do," he said, his voice almost harsh, and Bellatrix leered from behind him. Lily stiffened and reached over to grab James's knee.

"Well, I'm not cleaning up your vomit tonight," James spat, and Sirius laughed, but it lacked any amusement.

"That's why you've got me," Bellatrix crooned, kissing Sirius for a beat too long for comfort. Sirius leaned into it, and James looked unamused.

Then Sirius pulled back, and his gaze flashed over the rest of them, freezing at Severus. Severus did his best to hold it, tightening his grip on his thigh, and Sirius only broke it to take a long drink. No one spoke for a moment, and Severus wavered between anger and anguish. He wanted to hate Black, he really did, especially with him showing up with Bellatrix, but he couldn't. Not when his heart still yearned for him. Not when he felt light-headed about thinking of Sirius kissing him.

He thought he was better than this.

"Oy, Bella and I thought of a funny name for you," Sirius slurred finally, and Bellatrix smiled from behind him, but it was sharp and cruel.

"Tell him, babe," Bellatrix encouraged, and Sirius took a moment to get his mouth to work again. Severus could only think of how unwell Sirius looked, so he was unprepared when Sirius spoke again.

"Snivellus," Sirius sneered, and then he broke into breathless laughter, crunching forward at his stomach. Lily gasped, and Marlene looked ready to say something. Severus only felt everything else getting very distant. "See, because you-."

"Sirius," James cut him off harshly, and Sirius blinked and scowled. Bellatrix supported him from behind, laughing at the name.

"Snivellus, isn't that good?" she gloated. "Sniveling Snivellus. We thought it was quite funny," she said as if expecting agreement.

"No, it's not," Lily said, her voice pulsating with anger. "How about both of you fuck off, okay?"

"No need to get so upset," Bellatrix continued, putting on a face of offense. "Really, Lily."

"Yeah, come on. That's not cool," Marlene defended, and Bellatrix looked at her like she was nothing.

"Who are you?" she sneered, her tone demeaning, and Marlene fell quiet.

"Don't tell me what to do," he hissed, and Bellatrix's grip tightened on his arm. James looked taken aback and then he stood up to face Sirius.

"You've got to figure out your shit. Okay? Fucking hell, Sirius. What the fuck?"

Sirius only glared at him, unspoken words passing between them until James eventually reached for Lily and pulled her up.

"Come on, love. We don't need to fucking deal with him right now. Oh, and you too Severus. And Marlene if you want." James pulled a glaring Lily to the door, and Marlene hesitantly followed but then split off to find her friend. Severus took a moment longer, glaring at Sirius.

"Fuck you," he cursed, imparting as much disgust and contempt as he could. "And you asked why I didn't *fucking* like you." Sirius blinked, but Severus didn't wait for a response and stormed after Lily.

He shoved his hands in his pocket and walked as quickly as he could, and with a yawning relief, he found himself outside and away from fucking-fucking-

"Sev, wait!" Lily cried out, for in his rage he had stormed past them. He paused, shifting on his feet and glowering.

"What?" he hissed, and Lily flinched at his tone, causing the rage to worsen because god damn it, now Black had led him to scare Lily and *fuck*.

"Hey, hey," Lily murmured, trying to comfort Severus, and he rocked on the balls of his feet, fighting the strong urge to run over and punch something until his knuckles cracked. He caught sight of Potter out of the corner of his eye, and the look on his face made Severus want to punch him instead of the wall, because how dare he look at Severus as if he was *disgusted*.

Severus laughed, bitter and breathless. "Bet you're real pleased at that, huh?" he sneered at Potter, and the boy flinched. "You and your friends think you're so superior, and that I'm nothing more than a groveling piece of shit to laugh at. Oh, or as your friend so eloquently put it – a sniveling piece of shit, and you fucking laugh at it as if we should bow down to you and thank you for sparing one single thought for us, poor, ugly souls-."

Lily slapped him.

"You listen to me, Severus Snape," Lily hissed, and Severus shut his eyes because this was it. Not only had he destroyed everything with Black, but he had lost Lily in the process. He couldn't insult

her boyfriend like that and not hurt their friendship. "You're not," she spat in frustration and anger. "Don't say things like that. You're not a piece of, of-you're my best friend, do you understand? And you don't get to say shit like that about yourself. Not when it's so clearly not true."

"Lily," Severus protested lightly, swallowing hard.

"No," Lily said, her eyes ablaze. "No, Severus. You're not...you're one of the best people I know, if not the best. No matter what someone like Sirius Black says."

At his name, Severus gulped at the air and brought a hand to his head, trying to fight back against the prickling of tears. He hated himself for it. How he still wanted Black despite his cruelty. He thought something must be wrong with him.

"Oh, Sev," Lily said softly, pulling him into a hug. Severus froze against it and then gradually relaxed, burying his face into her shoulder. "Oh, Sev," she whispered.

When Severus felt composed, he pulled away and stared warily at James. James stared back grimly, his face set in a frown.

"He's not himself," James said awkwardly after a moment.

"What?"

"Sirius," James explained, hugging himself. "He...lashes out like this when he's hurting. I think he thinks if he drives people away, it means he can't hurt them. Um, I'm sorry, though about what he said. He's..." He swallowed hard and stared at the ground.

"Oh," Severus exhaled blandly, a million questions ricocheting in his head. "It doesn't excuse it."

James shook his head. "No, it doesn't." He fell quiet and then looked as if he needed to say something else.

"What is it?" Severus asked, exhaustion suddenly befalling him. He felt emotionally drained and gutted, and that cruel nickname still whispered in the back of his mind. It would haunt him for a while, he thought. *Snivellus*.

James sighed and met Severus's gaze. "He's hurting over you," he said quietly, and Severus felt the world tip out from under him. "About that night with...he feels like shit over it. And I know, I know," James raised his hands and then stared pleadingly at Severus. "You don't have to forgive him or anything, but if you could...just talk to him again? Nothing much, I know, but just so that he can start to sort through his shit? So that I don't have to lose him to someone like Bellatrix?"

Severus stared at him, keeping his face blank. "No," he said curtly, and James winced.

"Severus," Lily pressured gently, and Severus turned to her.

"You can't think-," he protested, but the look in her eyes stopped him. "I'm not something he can kick around, okay? If I come crawling back to him- Lily, please. I mean, I know he's not looking well but that's not my problem, I'm not-I'm not - oh god damn it, Lils, *fine*. But when he kicks me out laughing, that's going to be on you, okay?"

Lily pulled him into another hug, and James looked ready to cry from relief, and they made plans that he would come over tomorrow evening, and Severus walked back to his dorm, a giant ball of nerves pulsating inside him as half his heart softly cried, gut-wrenching every time he thought of the nickname, and the other half electrified with hope.

He fell asleep instantly and was grateful he couldn't remember his dreams.

Chapter 10

As Severus walked to Sirius's house, he thought the weather must be spiting him. Despite the turmoil and apprehension that sunk deep in his chest, the day was those rare, beautiful spring days that came far too early. Soft, white clouds dotted the sky, and Severus shrugged off his jacket as the sun caused him to sweat.

He scowled at it, angry that the day had decided to mock him. A dreary rainfall would have fit better. A terrifying thunderstorm. An apocalyptic style event that ended the world before Severus had to set foot in Sirius's house.

But no, he was stuck with singing birds and a gentle breeze caressing his cheek.

The walk seemed to bend the rules of time as it took approximately fifty years but also fifty seconds. For a brief moment, Severus strongly considered just walking past, but he had promised Lily. And more so, he thought, he wasn't a coward.

So he gritted his teeth and clenched his hands and knocked on the door.

James opened it quickly, practically throwing the door off the hinges. He looked unstrung, his hair flying every which way and his glasses slightly askew. He let out a heavy sigh of relief when he saw Severus.

"Oh, thank god," he muttered. "Thank you for coming. He's, um, he's just upstairs. First door on the left."

Severus nodded, fighting the urge to bite his lip in a show of nerves. James let him in, and he forced himself upstairs, resisting the urge to sprint back to his dorm. Then he was in front of the door, and he steeled himself, knowing there was no way to fully prepare for what was to come.

He knocked, hand flying out on its accord; he stared at it in disembodied dread. He heard a shout from the other side, and drawing a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped inside.

He blinked hard.

He had expected, he didn't know, a room? What he had entered was part drug den, part dump, part cry for help.

The windows were shuttered, the beautiful day locked outside. It made the room dark, the only light from a weak, sickly-looking lamp. Clothes and notebooks and other miscellaneous items littered the floor, and he pulled a face at a smell that wafted from one corner. The bedside table held weed paraphernalia, and empty beer cans surrounded the bed.

Sirius Black, himself, lay shirtless on the bed, staring vaguely at the ceiling. Severus's breath annoyingly caught in his throat when he saw Sirius's bare, muscled chest, and his fingers ached to touch the smooth skin. However, a second glance showed that Sirius looked pale and unwell.

Severus wondered if he had eaten recently.

“Prongs, I told ya,” Sirius began blandly as if emoting took too much effort. He sighed, then propped himself up lazily. When his gaze met Severus’s, he froze, a look of horror running across his face. “What-?” he gasped, eyes wide.

Fuck, of course, Potter wouldn’t tell Black that he was coming.

“Hello, Black,” Severus said, maintaining an air of dismissiveness. It wasn’t hard to considering how lowly Black looked right now. His gaze swept the room, and he grimaced. “I didn’t know you lived in a pigsty.”

“I...I mean,” Sirius fumbled, eyes entrenched on Severus. “What, what are you doing here?”

“Potter invited me. I figured I would say hi,” he lied. “But clearly,” he arched an eyebrow, and to his surprise, Sirius blushed.

“Well, I...” Sirius started again, unable to catch his rhythm. Severus rolled his eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been in here all day?” he asked, and then walked over to the windows. Without waiting for a reply, he yanked open the blinds, and sunlight streamed in like a slap. Sirius hissed and shielded his eyes. He opened one of the windows, and the breeze flowed through, fighting against the sick, stale air.

Then Severus turned back to look at the room, and with a face of immense distaste, he started to pick up Sirius’s clothes from the floors and dump them into a hamper.

“Seriously, Black,” he groaned, picking up another armful of dirty clothes. “You’re not an animal.”

“I...” Sirius stared at him shocked and swallowed hard a few times. “I...what are you doing here, Snape?” he asked weakly. Severus shot him a look and left the room without another word. He quickly retrieved a few trash bags from the kitchen and went back upstairs to start clearing up the beer cans beside his bed.

Sirius seemed more prepared this time, sitting upright on his bed and staring hard at Severus. Severus ignored him for a moment longer, trying to settle his rabbit heart.

“To answer your question, Black, I’m here because Potter asked me. He believes you’re self-destructing or some nonsense. But to be fair, considering the state of your room, his judgments don’t seem far off.”

“He said that?” Sirius said, swallowing thickly. Severus shot him another look and hissed when some beer spilled on him. He rubbed his hand off on Sirius’s sheets.

Sirius kept on staring at him as if he didn’t know what to make of him.

“Yes,” Severus sighed, and Sirius nodded too many times. He remained silent for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice sounded cautious and careful.

“I’m sorry about last night. That was...shitty of me.”

“You were drunk,” Severus excused blandly, even though they both knew it didn’t make it right. Sirius started to pick at a thread in his sheet.

“Doesn’t matter,” he muttered, and Severus threw a full trash bag into the corner and started

another one, picking leftovers off Sirius's desk.

With his back to Sirius, Severus felt he could be casual enough to ask about a topic that cut a little too close to his heart yet, he thought, would provide some closure. "I didn't know you had gotten back with Bellatrix." Severus licked his lips, mouth suddenly dry, and he could feel Sirius's gaze on his back.

"Yeah," Sirius said hoarsely. "Yeah, I did."

"Oh," Severus said, grimacing at some rotten yogurt. "She's very beautiful, Black."

Sirius didn't respond for a long moment, "Yeah, she is."

"Suppose that means that girl from the winter didn't work out?" Severus asked, trying to avoid the terrifying silence that awaited when conversation dried up.

"Huh?" Sirius asked dumbly, and Severus turned back to him, rolling his eyes.

"That girl you mentioned when we made dinner together? If you've already forgotten, then she clearly must not have mattered," Severus continued, waving a hand in dismissal. "Anyway, you and Bellatrix do look-."

"You're an idiot, Snape," Sirius said in surprised disbelief, and he laughed unpleasantly. Severus scowled.

"You don't need to insult me. It was only a question," he said icily, glaring at Sirius. Sirius raised a hand to his head and laughed again.

"Oh my fucking god," he said to himself, and Severus's scowl deepened. "There was never a girl," he said incredulously.

"Well, then I suppose you lied to me?" Severus hissed, and Sirius stared at him in amazement.

"Oh my fucking god, I swear," he paused. "There was never a girl," he stressed the last word, and Severus narrowed his eyes, trying to pick up on the meaning.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he asked in irritation. Sirius stared at him, gray eyes earnest and incredulous.

"It was *you*, you idiot."

Severus felt like he could physically see the words cross the room, and when they reached him, he felt dizzy and had to grab the desk to keep from tipping over. He stared stupidly at Sirius. "But you-," he protested, clinging to all his reasons Sirius would never want him.

"What?" Sirius asked, tilting his head. Severus noted that even though his face was relaxed, he gripped the sheets with white knuckles.

"You're straight," he tried, searching for air in a newly-existent vacuum. Sirius grinned at that and shook his head.

"Bisexual," he corrected. Severus reeled at that and wondered if all those heated gazes weren't just part of his imagination.

"But-," he tried again "You didn't want to kiss me? When Remus?"

Sirius's grin disappeared instantly, and he frowned. "I didn't want to kiss you there. Not as a dare. I wanted it to be, you know, I wanted our first kiss to mean something." He paused. "And I knew if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop."

Severus inhaled sharply, and he pressed his lips tightly together, trying to ignore the upwelling of desire. He felt as if he had run a marathon, unsteady and breathless, and he ached with desire. Desire to touch Sirius. To run his hands over his chest. To feel Sirius's beautiful lips against his own-

No, no, no, no.

This wasn't happening. Stuff like this didn't happen to him. He wasn't someone anyone would want, not something to be desired or yearned after

He shook his head to clear it, and Sirius's grin froze. "Um, I," Sirius said thickly, looking back down uncomfortable. "I'm sorry if I'm...being too forward. Or if this something you don't want... um, fuck."

Severus's no first came out as a shaky puff of air, but his second was much better. "No, no, Sirius, I just..."

"Just what, Sev?" Sirius asked, sounding defeated. He sucked in a deep breath as if in pain.

"Why would you?" Severus fumbled, trying desperately to explain. He gripped the desk tighter. "Why would you want someone like me?" He stared hard at a dirty gray T-shirt on the floor and tried to delay the wave of shame and embarrassment that crashed towards him.

Sirius startled, looking back up, and his mouth opened in an o. He moved then, standing up, and stood across from Severus.

"What do you mean?" he asked softly, and Severus's mouth twisted downwards. He huffed out a bitter laugh and leaned heavily against the desk.

"I'm not," he said harshly, "I'm not like Bellatrix." Sirius blinked and looked about to protest, but Severus pressed on. "You're quite possibly the most attractive person I've ever met, and I'm not, well there's a lot to be desired with me, isn't there? Like, like, Bellatrix, right? She's beautiful and popular like you are. And I'm...not. I don't have many friends, I'm not well-liked, I don't see... don't see how you could ever want someone like me, right?"

He tensed, waiting for Sirius to laugh or agree and stab a dagger into his vulnerable heart, but Sirius did none of that and just stood quietly. Severus ran a hand over his face and fought desperately against the prickling of tears. He couldn't add to his humiliation anymore.

"Do you..." Sirius said, swallowing hard. "Do you like me?"

"Of course," Severus admitted bitterly. "Of course, Sirius." Then he laughed again because it was either that or crying, but the laugh caught in his throat and came out more as a strangled sob anyway. Humiliation welled in him, and there was nothing left to do but leave. He started to turn towards the door, but Sirius crossed the room and reached out to grab his forearm.

Severus jolted to a stop, staring downwards so his lank hair shielded his face. Sirius's grip was warm and steady and made him feel like his feet had rooted to their spot. He couldn't stand to look at Sirius, so he kept his face turned away and waited for him to speak.

"Severus," Sirius began thickly. "There's never been...I've never wanted anyone as much as I've

wanted you. I, I don't why. But you're not...you're stunning, Severus," Sirius admitted quietly. "Breathtaking. I look at you, and I can barely...hey, I know, I know, you think you aren't. But your features are striking, trust me, and it's your mind, really, and your soul. They're...beautiful. Bella's aren't," he said flatly, and Severus trembled.

"I've been wanting to tell you," Sirius continued, voice low and troubled. "That's why I came down over break. James said I had to tell you; he couldn't stand me pining over you anymore. But I wasn't...I don't know, I've always been able to tell people, but I think this time it really mattered to me. And I just, I couldn't. And I haven't been able to find the courage until now, I guess. And it was...I mean," Sirius broke off, exhaling heavily.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking of you. Not for months. I've wanted you so badly. When you fell asleep on me, I was," Sirius inhaled sharply and broke off. "I'm sorry, Sev. For how shitty I've been to you. God, I just didn't know what to do. And last night, I felt so bad, and I didn't see how you could ever want someone like me, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry—."

Severus turned suddenly and pulled Sirius into an embrace, trembling violently in his arms. Sirius gasped, and then tightly wrapped his arms around Severus, pulling him flush against him. One hand reached up to cradle Severus's head, and Severus rested it against Sirius's shoulder, breathing erratically on Sirius's bare chest.

His fingers lay against bare skin, and they buzzed with the contact. Severus gasped as Sirius tightened his hold, the skin shifted underneath his fingertips, and the desire was thick and heady. He shut his eyes, basking in the feel of Sirius against him, how he smelt of stale sweat, and desperately needed a shower. How strong his arms were, how he seemed to slot perfectly into him, how his hair tickled softly against Severus's cheek. He lost his ability to breathe, but there was no sense of panic with it. Rather, he thought he would be perfectly happy to die in Sirius's arms. He could hardly imagine a better place.

"Oh, oh, Sev," Sirius murmured, and he sounded on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry, I am—."

Severus shushed him and ran his hands down Sirius's back, reveling in the feel of soft skin and how the movement sent jolts of electricity through him. Sirius gasped and buried his face against Severus's, the touch seeming to unmoor him.

"Severus, Sev," he muttered weakly, sounding breathless. "I'm going to start kissing you if that's okay? But I won't be able to stop, okay?"

"Then don't," Severus said, amazed how steady his voice sounded, and then Sirius's lips were on his own and all conscious thought abandoned him.

Sirius's lips were soft and earnest, his breath hot against Severus's cheek. It took a minute for Severus to remember how to move, but he did, starting slowly because he hadn't been kissed in quite some time. It came back easily enough, and he moved against Sirius's lips, the kiss growing more insistent.

Severus's mouth opened slightly as he tilted his head against Sirius's, and Sirius took the opportunity to slip his tongue into Severus's mouth, and Severus flushed in embarrassment when he moaned against it. Sirius's tongue moved deftly, and Severus's sifted his fingers through Sirius's luscious hair and pulled his head closer, and then Sirius moaned, and Severus felt his soul temporarily leave his body.

He sucked on Sirius's bottom lip, and Sirius shuddered against him, moving in to deepen the kiss, and Severus realized that both he and Sirius had started to grow hard, and that was enough to cause

him to panic, and he pulled back suddenly, breathing hard.

Sirius's stare was intense, but he balanced it out with a soft smile, and Severus noted with a twitch of his cock how Sirius's lips were swollen and his cheeks were flushed and he was *beautiful*.

Sirius grew concerned upon noticing something in Severus's eyes, and he stepped back, giving them both space to breathe. Severus felt light-headed, so he walked over to the desk chair and sat down heavily, leaning forward. Sirius followed a moment later and sat beside him on the floor, legs outstretched and back against the desk drawers. He looked up at Severus affectionately.

"Too fast?" Sirius asked gently, and Severus nodded jerkily. Sirius sighed and rested a hand on Severus's bare ankle, rubbing his thumb up and down the skin. "It's okay. We'll move slower."

"Sorry," Severus whispered because he had the heady sense Sirius would take him to bed right here and now.

"Shh, no. You don't need to apologize. This isn't a race, okay? We'll go as fast or as slow as you want." Severus swallowed hard against Sirius's kindness and wanted badly to kiss him again.

"I've," he began because he felt it was something Sirius should know. Especially with Sirius as experienced as he was. "I've never done it before. With anyone. So I just, I just-" he trailed off and drew in a shuddering breath, trying to tamp down on the sense of vulnerability. He stared to the side and waited for Sirius to speak.

Sirius finally did, his voice sounding raw. Severus looked over at him, and his face was flushed and his pupils blown. "Oh, fuck," he said hoarsely. "Oh, Sev, I'll make it so good for you. So good you'll...but only when you're ready, okay? Not a moment before." He laughed at Severus's skeptical look. "I can wait, trust me. I'll wait as long as I need to until you're ready."

Sirius tilted forward to press his forehead against Severus's knee, and Severus reached down to gently stroke through Sirius's hair. Sirius sighed against the touch, and Severus decided he never wanted to stop.

He also mulled over Sirius's words for a moment and felt a yawning relief over the fact his admission wasn't met with scorn. And more than that, thrilling anticipation over Sirius's words.

All of a sudden, Sirius laughed, the sound bright. He stared up at Severus, his eyes vibrant, and Severus couldn't help but think he probably hadn't laughed like that for weeks. Severus tilted his head, and Sirius grinned.

"James is going to be elated. Jesus, he's been trying to get me to tell you for months."

Severus gave a small smile and stroked his hand through Sirius's hair because it was probably the softest thing he had ever touched. "Lily, too," he replied, and Sirius smiled and pressed against Severus's knee.

"God, I'm so happy, Sev," Sirius said, the joy shining through his voice.

"Me too," Severus whispered, and Sirius smiled, looking back up to him. Severus thought if Sirius kept on looking at him like this he would simply die of happiness. "I think you're going to kill me," he admitted, his brain short-circuiting. Sirius tilted his head and looked at him in confusion, and Severus shook his head. "Of happiness. Of...looking at me like that."

Sirius looked taken aback, eyes muted with shock. When he seemed to recover, he rested his hands on Severus's knees and propped himself upward so that he could kiss Severus again. Severus

leaned into it, and it was even better the second time, lips moving softly together.

“So beautiful,” Sirius murmured, and Severus practically glowed. All of the nights spent crying over Sirius suddenly felt worth it. Maybe it hadn’t been easy and better communication would have served them well, but now that it happened, Severus wouldn’t have changed anything.

Severus laughed softly and kissed Sirius again, thrilling that he was able to. “Have you looked in a mirror lately?” he teased, and Sirius laughed against him, and Severus felt a rich sense of happiness fall over him. Sirius was his now. And he was Sirius’s. And it felt impossibly right.

At the thought, Severus suddenly remembered the hot Alpha Phi queen and pulled back, frowning. Sirius looked at him puzzled, and Severus worked a jaw for a moment before finding the nerves to bring up the topic.

“Bellatrix...” he started, and Sirius shook his head.

“It’s over with her. She’s not...” Sirius inhaled heavily and leaned back. “She’s not good for me. She makes...makes me into someone I don’t want to be. James sees it, which is why he can’t stand her. He practically ripped out his hair when I got back with her after...but I just, after that, she was there. But I’ll end it with her,” he paused and then laughed. “God, she’s going to hate that I broke up with her again over you.”

Severus arched an eyebrow. “Again?”

Sirius rubbed the back of his neck and smiled guiltily. “Yeah, the first time was about you too. Yeah, I know what I said. She didn’t want me to talk to you anymore, and well, I wasn’t about to take that, you know?”

“Yeah,” Severus agreed quietly. He wasn’t sure if he should say more, but Sirius shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it, Sev. You’re someone...I’m not giving up on this easily.”

“Okay,” Severus agreed, even though he still felt somewhat nervous over it. Bellatrix would not take kindly to the fact that he had stolen her man, and he didn’t want to think of what she might do. But, he supposed, as long as Sirius wanted him, it didn’t matter.

Sirius smiled again and pushed himself upwards. “How about we go break the news to James? If he set this up, he’s probably panicking that I’ve tried to kill myself or some nonsense.”

Severus laughed and let Sirius help him up, hands touching. He didn’t want to let go, but Sirius did to pull on a shirt, smelling it quickly. Severus grimaced, and Sirius sheepishly shrugged.

Then Sirius’s eyes darkened, and Severus swallowed hard as Sirius stepped forward and cupped Severus’s cheeks between his hands, fingers long and cool, and kissed him as if he meant it with every inch of his soul.

When he finally broke off, Severus stared dumbly out the window, brain slowly sputtering back into action. Sirius grinned, and Severus smiled back at him, lips pulled upwards in one of the most full-hearted smiles he’d ever expressed. Sirius blinked at that, some unidentifiable emotion welling in his eyes.

The moment held and then passed, and Sirius grabbed Severus’s hand as they left his room. As they did, they ran into Peter who had just come from downstairs. He stared between them, gaze flicking down to their joined hands, and his eyes narrowed and mouth hardened.

“Didn’t know you wanted to fuck Snape,” Peter said, and Severus tensed at his tone. Sirius stared at him confused, and then his gaze shuttered down. He shrugged and sighed.

“Yeah, guess I do,” he said casually. “James downstairs?” he asked. Peter nodded, and Sirius pushed past him. As Severus walked past, Peter stared at him, his eyes hard, and Severus didn’t like how he looked at him. It unsettled him, and he felt a surge of panic over whether or not Sirius’s friends would accept them. James and Remus seemed okay, but the others...

They walked into the living room, and Lily was there now, holding tightly onto James’s hands as he spoke in a low, anxious voice. She looked tense, face set in a frown. It took them a moment for them to notice Sirius and Severus, but when they did, Lily broke into a blinding smile.

“Oh, Sev!” she said, and she ran up and pulled him into a hug. Severus smiled into her hair, and Lily leaned back, the force of her smile overwhelming. She turned to Sirius.

“Finally grew some balls, didn’t you? Oh, I’m so happy. Oh, Sev,” she said brightly. James stood behind her, and he looked at if he had just pulled through a long sleepless night.

“Thank god,” he said with enormous relief. “So this is official now? Right? You guys talked it over?”

Sirius nodded and grinned sheepishly. “Yup, it’s official.”

James threw his hands up in celebration and reached out to pat Sirius on his shoulders. “Mate, don’t ever do that to me again. Next time you fall for someone, we’ve got to take of it ASAP.”

Sirius huffed out a laugh, and Lily expressed her agreement, and then Sirius pulled him onto the couch, arm thrown over his shoulder and bodies pressed together, and Severus smiled. Lily and James sat down beside them, and they talked, the atmosphere relaxed and happy, and when he finally left, after several hours of easy conversation, his face ached from smiling more than he had for a long while.

Chapter 11

On the walk home, his phone started to ring. He pulled it out, glanced at the user ID, and felt a bucket of ice drench him.

He stumbled to a stop and stared at his phone, hands already starting to tremble. Don't answer, he thought. Don't answer.

But that wasn't how it worked. Lucius Malfoy was not someone you could ignore, and if he denied the call, Lucius would only confront him in person. And since Lucius frightened him, it was much better to do it over the phone.

He slid up to accept the call, and a bubble of fear pressed against his organs. He devoted everything he could to keeping his voice steady and emotionless.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Severus?" Lucius said, his voice soft. It sounded like a snake, some small part of Severus's mind thought. A snake that would slither carefully into your ear before inserting fangs and injecting corrosive poison.

"What do you want, Lucius?"

He could practically feel Lucius smile against the phone. "No how are you? Tsk, Tsk, Severus. Have you already forgotten the manners I taught you?"

Severus forced himself to relax, to keep his breathing steady, to not let anger and resentment color his voice.

"I suppose I have. Now, what do you want?"

Lucius paused. "I've heard you've finally found someone to suck your cock. I almost want to ask how much you've had to pay him, but the lewd details don't particularly intrigue me."

Severus froze and didn't speak. A horrible sense of dread came over him.

"Now, Severus, dear roommate, I don't think your father would be particularly proud to hear

you're being fucked like a bitch," Lucius drawled. "So I believe it would be in your best interest to end things. I would say break his heart and all, but that would seem to indicate that he actually cares about you. No, rather, if I catch wind that you are seeing Sirius Black anymore, I may just have to intervene and send some videos I have of you to your father. For your best interest, of course."

Severus felt torn apart and adrift, and he clenched on to his pretense of apathy as if it was a life vest. He would not give Lucius any more sense of victory.

"Are you threatening me?" he said icily, and Lucius laughed.

"Of course I am. I see you with Black, I out you to your homophobic father. Sound alright with you?"

"Why?" Severus gritted because he couldn't understand it. Why the hell would Lucius care? Why the hell would he emerge after two years to tear Severus's world apart?

"My reasons are my own. Is that a yes, Severus?"

Severus wanted to yell no and curse him out and finally say all the things he had wanted to say to Lucius for years. He wanted to laugh in his face, tell him that he would have to try harder if he wanted to keep him from Sirius. He wanted to defy him, to let his feelings for Sirius conquer all.

But he didn't.

"Yes," he said as blandly as he could. Lucius said something else, but Severus couldn't hear him through the roaring in his head. Lucius hung up, and Severus numbly slipped the phone back into his pocket.

He stood rooted to the spot, unable to think past the violent white noise in his head.

He loved Sirius, he knew that now. He wanted Sirius; Sirius wanted him. But he couldn't have his father know. Not when his mom was still sick and had yet to reach remission. He couldn't tear his family apart like this, not yet, not when his mom needed him.

He reached out to rub at his face and looked at his wet hand in surprise. Funny, he thought distantly. He thought he had finished crying over Sirius.

He took off again, body numb, and he slowly drifted back to his dorm. He sat down on his bed and stared at the wall for a very long time, face blank. Then he curled over and started to cry in great, heaving gasps as he thought of Sirius and his mom and what his dad would do.

He had no choice. He couldn't risk his mom's health. No matter how badly he wanted Sirius. No matter how much his heart ached for him.

With trembling fingers, he pulled out his phone, wrote a text as his tears blurred the letters, and with a terrifying sense of dread and loss, pressed send.

Then he toppled over in his bed, screamed into his pillow, and cried until he was weak with it and sleep mercifully took him away.

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Sirius, I've thought more about this, and I don't think this will work.

I'm sorry, but I can't give you what you want.

I'm also not ready to begin something like this.

I understand this is not pleasant to hear, but it's for our best interest.

You're very attractive, you'll have no trouble finding someone else.

Goodbye, Sirius.

Severus?

Pick up ur phone

God damnit, pick up ur phone

Ur not doing this to me

U at least owe me this in person

Severus what the fuck?

Pick up your phone

Please, Severus, please

Sev, ur breaking my heart

Don't do this to me

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Severus made it a week before Lily was finally able to track him down. She found him in the back corners of the library, lost behind the archives, and she glared at Severus angrily.

He tried to keep his face passive, but Lily wasn't having it.

"How dare you?" she hissed, and Severus flinched. "How dare you ignore my texts? My calls? I've been worried sick over you."

Severus crumpled with guilt but managed to keep his face schooled.

"I apologize," he said blandly, and Lily's eyes narrowed at his tone.

"Not like that, you don't," she whispered harshly, and Severus frowned. Lily glared at him, and his jaw twitched as he tried to find the words. He couldn't let her know, he thought. It would be terribly humiliating to think he still bent to Lucius's will.

"It's been a difficult week," he finally decided upon, and Lily snorted.

"Yeah, well after that text you sent Sirius? Severus, what happened? You seemed to so clearly want him," she said, her voice softening towards the end. Severus took a moment to remove the frown from his face and did his best to pretend at apathy.

"It wasn't going to work out," he said blandly. Fortunately, a week of tremendous heartbreak had numbed him enough so that his heart only muttered a weak protest.

Lily stared at him incredulously. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do," he muttered, and Lily bit her lip.

"Severus," she began softly, but Severus shot her a hard look. He could hardly stand to think of Sirius, let alone speak of him. And since he couldn't explain his reasoning, there was no point to this. He needed Lily to leave and then he could escape back into the sterile world of chemicals.

Lily stared off to the side, looking concerned and lost in thought. "Then at least you have to talk to him. In person. You shouldn't end stuff like this over the phone," she eventually said, sounding sad and broken up.

Severus shook his head. "I can't," he whispered painfully. Lily stared at him hard, and Severus was taken aback by the disappointment in her eyes.

"No," she countered. "No. He's...not doing well over this, okay? So at the very least, you owe him this."

Severus knew she was right. He knew that's exactly what he should do, but he couldn't. Not when seeing Sirius and the pain in his eyes would break him. Not when he would have to lie to his face and pretend his heart still didn't ache for him.

It was easiest, it was *best*, if he took Lucius's advice and never saw him again. He imagined it would only take a week or two for Sirius to forget about his greasy, narrow features and move onto someone else. If Severus drew it out, it would only make it worse.

"I *can't*," he tried again, wincing as his voice broke on the last word, and he turned quickly back to his textbook so Lily wouldn't have to see the pain that clearly shone through his eyes.

Lily didn't speak for a long beat and then reached out to lay her hand over Severus's. He resisted the urge to pull away; someone as pitiful as him didn't deserve Lily's kindness.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her words tinged with sorrow. Severus struggled to breathe and squeezed his eyes shut. "What's wrong?" she repeated, the kindness in her voice tearing down his makeshift barriers. He pressed his other hand against his mouth to try to smother an upwelling of sobs.

"I," he exhaled heavily, shame making him feel sticky and gross. "I'm..." He had no choice but to tell her. She would finally see him as he was: weak and pitiful and undeserving. But the words clamored to be let out, and he felt powerless against them. "Lucius," he whispered, the word plunging the temperature in their corner several degrees.

"What about him?" Lily asked, an edge to her voice. She tensed, and her grip on his hand tightened.

"He...he called me," he forced out. "After I left. Said if I...I continue to see Sirius, he'll...he'll tell my father about me. He has videos of me saying things, Lils. And I can't-I couldn't-."

"Oh, Severus," Lily murmured thickly and pulled him into a hug. Severus leaned against her, tamping down on the urge to cry.

"I'm sorry," he continued painfully. "I shouldn't have-I couldn't say, but my mom, she's not-."

Lily shushed him, gently stroking his hair. They sat like that for a while, and Severus soaked in her warmth and kindness. He was so tired of feeling alone and lost. And even if it was wrong of him,

he would drink in Lily's comfort like a man dying of thirst.

He sat back up when he finally felt collected enough but avoided Lily's gaze. Instead, he twisted his hands in his lap and read about chemical relativity through blurry vision.

"He's not getting away with this," Lily declared, her voice steely, and Severus flinched, panic surging within him.

"No, Lils, you can't," he protested, but it was no use. Lily didn't tolerate injustices against him, she never had, and there was no use arguing with her once she set her mind. Severus had realized early on that Lily was perhaps the most stubborn person he had ever met.

"He's not getting away with this," she repeated, shrugging her shoulders as if the statement was painfully obvious and practically already done. "No, Sev, I know. Your father won't know until you're ready. But, god damn it, if I let Lucius Malfoy take Sirius Black from you. Nope, that son of a bitch won't know what hit him."

Severus finally looked over at her, and the determination and resolution in her eyes floored him. She looked ready to fight through hell if it meant removing all the obstacles between Sirius and him. It was terrifying, and Severus thought desperately that he must never *ever* get on Lily's bad side.

Lily tapped her fingers against the desk as she thought, a gritty glint in her eyes. Severus waited for her to speak and felt almost whiplashed by the dramatic turn of events.

Her face furrowed in confusion, and she looked up at Severus. "How the hell did he know?" she asked, and Severus blinked. "He called you right after you left, right?" Severus nodded. "Then how the hell did he know? Only James and I knew, right? And James knows I'll kill him if he ever did anything like that to you."

Severus frowned, mind flashing back to that night. He had spent the past week trying so hard to forget it all that he had never thought over that particular point.

"I...", he tried, as his mind replayed the events. James, and then Sirius, and *Sirius*, and no, no, who else, Lily, Remus wasn't there but... "Pettigrew," he said breathlessly, "He saw us in the hallway."

"Okay," Lily thought. "Did he say anything?"

Severus thought for a moment and nodded. "He said that he didn't know...that, um, that Sirius wanted to fuck me. He didn't seem very pleased with it."

"Okay," Lily repeated, nodding. "Okay, then there's motive. He doesn't want Sirius to be with you."

Severus frowned, the myriad of reasons of why Pettigrew would disparage their relationship easily springing to mind. Lily seemed to notice and gently pushed his shoulder.

"Don't look like that. Peter's probably just a homophobic prick." She pushed on. "Okay, so let's say Lucius found out from Peter."

"How would he know?" Severus said quietly. He suddenly felt a spike of panic over the idea that his humiliating freshman year had been spread around the university like juicy gossip. He dreaded the idea of people looking at him and knowing what he had conceded to and allowed to happen.

Lily looked stumped and began to question out loud. "Would he know Lucius from anywhere? Did

you ever see him freshman year? Would they be in anything together?"

Severus furrowed his brow. "I can't think of anything. But why would it matter, Lils? It doesn't change the fact that-."

"Because, Sev," Lily explained slowly, "we can threaten him. Tell him to call Lucius off or else we'll expose him."

Severus blinked at that but couldn't argue with her. He doubled down on his commitment to never piss Lily off.

"Alright," he agreed, and Lily smiled sharply. "But," he said, anxiety curdling in his stomach. "What if he doesn't care? Or if we're wrong? And then Lucius still tells...I can't risk it, Lils."

Lily frowned and mulled it over. "We'll figure it out, okay? Um, and I think we should tell Sirius and James."

Severus jerkily shook his head. "No, I can't." Lily looked at him grimly.

"Sirius is falling apart over you," she said, and Severus stared at her wide-eyed. "And we're not going to let these bastards win. So we'll tell Sirius and James, and we'll work it through it together. You don't have to do this alone, Sev."

He gripped the edges of the desk and breathed in sharply through his teeth. Her words crashed over him with a mixed sense of relief and apprehension, and the look in her eyes dispelled any arguments he could summon.

"Okay," he gritted out. Lily smiled brightly and leaned forward to kiss him on his cheek.

"I'll text James, and we can meet in the, um, the, we'll find an empty classroom," Lily said, pulling out her phone. She sent a quick text and looked back at Severus. "Ready?"

He frowned again but nodded. With slow, exact movements, he slipped his textbook and notebook into his backpack, and with a sickening sense of trepidation that he tried to shrug off, he followed Lily out of his solitary corner of the library.

Chapter 12

When Severus saw Sirius again, his heart broke. Sirius looked terribly unwell, dark bags smudging underneath his eyes as if he hadn't been sleeping. His hair had lost its shine, and he had pulled it into a loose bun. He wore thick sweatpants and a sweatshirt, yet Severus imagined Sirius would look thinner than usual. Even his cheeks seemed gaunt, sharp cheekbones pressing against his skin. He had set his mouth into a frown.

Severus yearned to stumble forward and smooth the look of pain from his face, but he stood rooted in place. Instead, he could only stare stricken at the agony lacing Sirius's eyes. He realized with horror that he had caused it.

He now understood why Lily insisted that he talked face-to-face with Sirius. If he had only seen what he had done, beyond the emotionless binary digits, he couldn't have maintained the pretense that he didn't want Sirius. He would have confessed everything if only to alleviate the anguish that lay thick on Sirius's skin.

He didn't know his actions would have hurt Sirius so profoundly.

His eyes flickered over to James, who regarded Severus with hostile wariness. He looked tired too, and Severus realized how this must look. He suddenly wanted to apologize, but the words froze in his throat.

A terrifying silence settled over the room, only broken when Lily stepped forward.

"We've got to talk," she declared, and Sirius stared at her wildly. He turned back to look at Severus. The heartbreak in his eyes threatened to bowl him over. Lily turned to him too and waited expectantly.

He steadied himself and beholden to Lily's will, started to explain. "I'm sorry," he directed towards Sirius, who flinched. "I didn't know-," he broke off, biting the inside of his cheek. James scoffed dismissively.

"Like hell, you didn't, Snape," James hissed, and Lily tried to shush him. "What?" he turned to her, "He knew exactly what he was doing."

"James," Sirius murmured softly, gaze fixed on Severus. James looked posed to argue, so Severus tried to cut in.

"I didn't mean-."

James laughed. "Fuck you, dude."

“James,” Lily warned and James looked at her incredulously.

“You think he can do that to my best friend and not-,” he spat. Severus flinched at his scathing tone.

“Listen to him!” Lily interrupted, and the steel in her voice caused James to pause. Severus took the cue, knowing that it would be depraved to shrug off their concerns. He couldn’t claim at a semblance of a heart if he dismissed Sirius now.

“Lucius Malfoy called me,” he said quickly and saw Sirius tense at the name. “He said if I didn’t cut things off, he would, um, out me to my father,” he pressed on, voice growing soft as the emotions grew more poignant. He ignored how James and Sirius gasped. “My mom’s sick, and my, my father wouldn’t handle it well, and I couldn’t risk...I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, but I didn’t what else to do. I thought it would be easier if I just-.”

He broke off as Sirius practically lunged forward and pulled him into an embrace. Severus inhaled in surprise, initially tensing but relaxing as Sirius grasped his shirt. Severus hesitantly rested his hands on Sirius’s back, and he wanted to cry at the influx of relief that threatened to sweep him off his feet.

“I’m sorry,” Severus whispered desperately, torn between guilt and relief. “I’m so sorry, Sirius.” Sirius shuddered against him and pressed his face against the side of Severus’s head, breathing in deeply.

“I thought,” he said thickly. “I thought,” but he seemed unable to express it and after a long moment, pulled away. He gazed earnestly at Severus, face fracturing with relief. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked brokenly. He ran a hand helplessly through his hair, his expression pleading. “I would have helped you.”

Severus swallowed hard and looked down. “I’m sorry,” he apologized again, voice breaking with the weight of it. “I didn’t think anyone could help.”

“Well, you’re wrong,” Sirius spat, and when Severus looked back up at him, anger had hardened his features. “How dare he think he can-? No, fuck him,” he growled. He turned to James, shoulders tense. “We’re going to fucking kill him,” he hissed, and James nodded, expression sober.

James looked at Severus with a fierce determination in his eyes. “We don’t let people get away with stuff like this. Especially if you’re our friend.”

Severus ran his hands down his shirt, floored by their responses. Yet, he couldn’t fight Lucius. Lucius always won. “No,” he protested, “he’s not someone, I’m sorry, I can’t risk it.”

Lily stepped forward, reaching out her arm to rest it on Severus’s forearm. Her eyes conveyed her resolve, and Severus blinked hard, protests dying on his lips.

She then sat on a desk and crossed her legs. “We think it was Peter.”

“Why would Peter?” James asked, clearly confused, but Sirius’s grim face cut him off. “What?” he asked Sirius.

Sirius muttered a curse as they all stared at him expectantly. “Bellatrix,” he finally hissed, and Severus felt himself freeze and grow very cold. Everyone else seemed to feel the same, Lily’s expression growing somber.

“What about her?” Lily asked with some difficulty, and a hard frown settled on Sirius’s face.

“He...I don’t know, has some weird fascination with her,” he settled on, even though he seemed to have more to say. James stared at him, realization crossing his face.

“You think he would...,” James asked with faint horror. Sirius grimaced and nodded. James ran a hand through his hair, looking frazzled.

“Would she have known about Lucius?” Lily asked, and Sirius nodded.

“They’re part of the same world. Old families and all that. I think she would have known.”

“Oh,” Severus exhaled, shame corroding into him again. Sirius looked at him as if he understood and yearned to comfort him.

“Okay, so Peter told Bellatrix,” she rehashed. “Because he likes Bellatrix? Or something, right?” Sirius nodded, and James looked stunned by the betrayal. “And Bellatrix knew about Lucius, so she asked him to get Severus out of the picture? So that she could...” she looked at one of them to finish it off.

“I suppose so I won’t leave her,” Sirius finished, brow furrowing as he thought it over. “She’s... she’s convinced we’re getting married. Good blood,” he spat out, voice twisting in bitter amusement. He laughed unpleasantly, “God, my mom probably set her up to it.”

James nodded. “That makes sense, right? She wouldn’t want to lose you, Sirius, even if it meant threatening Severus.”

Severus was surprised when anger finally began to filter through the shame. He didn’t amount too much, but he wasn’t someone to casually walk over. He refused to let people like Sirius or Bellatrix or Lucius treat him as lesser simply because he didn’t have money or an esteemed family name.

He welcomed the rage because it gave him purpose. He would find a way to claim power over them. They would no longer treat him as weak.

“So we take care of her,” he said softly and noted with a smirk that he became scarily quiet when overcome with rage.

Lily nodded, resting her chin on her hand as she thought. James sat heavily on a desk and stared unseeingly out the window.

“I’ll handle it,” Sirius growled after a moment, and Lily jolted.

“No, Sirius, you can’t,” she began, and Severus tensed at the panic in her voice. He didn’t particularly trust Sirius in handling this tactfully either.

“Lily, don’t tell me what I can’t do,” Sirius said heatedly, and James’s head whipped towards him. Severus swallowed hard and stepped forward to mediate.

However, before he could, Lily spoke again.

“It’s not like, Sirius, I’m not trying to...she just talks to us sometimes, the girls, um about how we can get exes in trouble. Her dad’s a lawyer, right? And she said you can trump up charges pretty easily if you know what you’re doing,” Lily admitted quietly, and James stared at her wide-eyed.

“Are you fucking me?” he asked, and Lily shook her head. “Yeah, mate, you’re not talking with her. I don’t care. I’m not watching her take you down.”

Sirius stood eerily still and then kicked hard at a desk, causing it to skid against the room. Everyone flinched, and Severus felt sick. Sirius cursed harshly and turned to Severus to laugh harshly.

“Bet you weren’t expecting a fucking insane ex?”

Severus reached out to grab one of Sirius’s hands, the muscles in his palm and wrist tense. He threaded his fingers between Sirius’s and felt him relax after a moment. He sighed, tightening the grip.

“It’s easy,” Severus said, the words slow and cool. “What we do.” The clarity had struck him, the strategy played out before him like the final moves in a chess game.

“Yeah?” James asked impatiently. Severus tilted his head and smirked.

“We threaten her,” he said simply, and Sirius jumped in.

“I’ve got nudes if that helps. But I’m not sure she would really care if I leaked them,” he offered, and Lily stared at him grimly.

“Revenge porn,” she explained, and the idea died.

Severus shook his head. “No, we need something...something that she would never want anyone to see.”

“And how the hell do we get that?” James asked, frustration lacing his voice. Severus smirked again and looked at Lily who stared back in perfect realization.

“Regulus,” she announced, and Severus nodded, causing Sirius and James to stare at them slack-jawed.

“My brother?” Sirius exclaimed. “My brother has dirt on Bellatrix Lestranger?”

Severus smiled. “No, but he will.”

Lily smiled too and pulled out her phone to dial his number.

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“I could just like plant child porn on his computer if you want?” Regulus said casually, taking a final hit from his joint. He blew the smoke out his bedroom window and crossed the room to sit at his desk. He spun in his chair to face them, legs spread before him and arms crossed.

“You can?” James gulped, and Regulus laughed and winked.

“No,” Lily pulled back, even though Severus had started to consider it. “Just something on Bellatrix. Blackmail material, the usual.”

“The usual?” James croaked, seeming very out of his depth. “You’ve done this before?”

Lily rolled her eyes. “You’ve never seen a single movie, dear?” James looked about to protest until Sirius cut in. He stared in mild awe at Regulus’s set up: the computer and numerous cables and high-tech projects.

“I didn’t know you did all this,” he admitted, and Regulus shrugged.

“When you were off fighting with Mom and Dad, I figured out how to hack. Not a bad skill to have in handy.” He waved his hand in dismissal. “So like anything then?”

“Whatever you find,” Severus said, “But it has to be bad. She’s threatened to do something to me, um, to out me to my dad,” he explained at Regulus’s inquisitive look. Regulus hissed at that and muttered a curse.

“So basically something that outweighs that for her. To destroy you and your relationship with my brother,” he smirked, “or to destroy herself.” He thought for a long moment and then smiled brightly. “Okay, got it!” He turned to his computer and began to type in commands. He unwrapped a lollipop and stuck it in his mouth, keyboard clacking violently.

Lily and Severus, familiar with Regulus’s habits, sat down on his bed. Lily began to scroll through her phone, and Severus pulled up an ebook and began to read.

James and Sirius, much more unfamiliar with Regulus’s habits, sat hesitantly after a minute and continued to glance at him before finally taking the cue from Lily and Severus to pull out their phones.

However, Sirius kept twitching, seeming unable to focus. After some time, he stood up and looked down at Severus. “Um, you think we could talk?” he asked nervously, and Severus blinked up at him.

“Yeah,” he said softly, and Sirius shoved his hands into his pockets. He nodded too many times and bit at his lip. Severus felt something twist in his stomach, and he stood up, trying to smile kindly at Sirius.

They were about to leave but paused when Regulus held up his hand. “Mhgsf,” he mumbled through the lollipop before taking it out and swiveling towards them. “Sorry, Sev. Can’t leave just yet. We’ve gotta reminisce over freshman year.”

Severus scowled at the mention of it, but took Regulus’s cue and sat next to him. Sirius grimaced and then sat back down next to James, exchanging a meaningful look with Severus before he did. They would talk, Severus thought, and preferably sooner than later.

Regulus turned back to the computer and didn’t speak for several minutes, flicking through screens that Severus couldn’t decipher. Finally, he pulled the lollipop out of his mouth again.

“Okay, so, what I’m thinking is that - Bellatrix’s a tough one to crack,” he said, drawing out some of the syllables. “But what I’m thinking is that there might be something...you remember, ah, I think Lucius took to you to one or two, but those weird debate club meetings I used to go to?”

Severus thought back and nodded. Lily perked up.

Regulus moved through several expressions before settling on awkward remembrance. “Yeah, they were kind of like this front for some weird shit. Like weird class war shit. Riddle never approved letting you in on it cause well, you haven’t sold your soul for money.”

“Riddle?” Lily asked from the bed. Severus processed what he heard and found he really wasn’t surprised. Of course, Lucius would be involved in some warped rich eat the poor shit.

Regulus nodded. “Yeah, he’s a professor in the poly sci department? Remus might have had him,” he said towards Sirius, and Sirius nodded.

“Remus thought he was brilliant.”

Regulus laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, cause he is. Like frighteningly so. But he’s also like kind of insane? On some weird Social Darwinism shit.” He paused, typing out some code, and plugging a black box into his computer. “Okay so basically, I got out of it. Um, after I saw what Lucius was doing to you, well, I’m not about that kind of shit.”

Severus twisted his mouth and muttered out a thanks. Regulus shrugged, staring intently at the computer screen.

“You don’t need to thank me for being a decent human being. But what I was saying is that I think Lestrangle and...and Riddle were involved with each other.” He said, pulling a face. Sirius barked out a laugh, and James looked at him if he didn’t know if he had lost it or not. “Sorry, bro,” he said, and Sirius laughed again.

“No need to apologize. I’m much better off without her.” Sirius smiled, his tone relieved and merely amused. “Anyway, I’ve got Sev now,” he continued, winking. Regulus laughed at that and smiled at the dark computer screen.

“Yeah, I don’t know how you got so fucking lucky.”

“Me either,” Sirius said, grinning at Severus. Severus felt a blush spread across his cheek, and he quickly looked away.

“So we threaten Riddle?” Lily asked, refocusing the conversation. She sat up and tilted her head as she thought. “Or, I mean, what would he have to lose?”

Regulus nodded, fingers flying over the keyboard. “He’s on track to be tenured. A relationship with a student could threaten that. Also, married with what looks like a daughter? So an affair won’t be pretty.”

“But Bellatrix, would she care?” James asked, eyes narrowing. Regulus nodded again.

“Yeah, she idolizes him. And he’s also fucking terrifying. So if he thought this,” he gestured around the room, “was a threat to him, Lestrangle is done for. Malfoy too, for that matter.”

“Okay, okay,” Lily agreed, nodding her head quickly. “We threaten Riddle that we’ll reveal his relationship with Bellatrix unless she leaves Sirius and Severus alone,” she said it slowly, pondering over the words. “And if they leak the video, then we’re releasing...what do you have on him?”

Regulus smiled. “Webcam. Sev, my wonderful friend, got me a Theia for my birthday.” He huffed out a laugh. “Who knew, huh?”

“And what does a Theia do?” Lily asked, and Severus shrugged.

“I just remember Reggie mentioning it once.”

Regulus laughed again. “A Theia,” he explained, “helps me copy someone’s computer onto my own. It basically inputs their data into mine? You’re not going to get it if I try to explain.” James nodded earnestly at that, and Lily laughed at his bafflement.

“Did you find anything?” Severus asked carefully, and Regulus sucked in his lips and nodded.

“On the webcam feature of his computer. The NSA did some shit so now video data is like stored on hardware forever? Guess so they can catch terrorists and spy on normal people? It’s pretty hard to search through, but well, Google Photos has this super useful function where it categorizes

people's faces. So I basically superimposed that function with Lestrage's face onto the video data, and voila," he said, flourishing his arms out. He peered at the computer screen. "February, um, 18th?" He clicked open the video file and grimaced, closing it quickly. "Yup, they are fucking. Okay, great, I never need to see that again." He typed in a few commands and nodded. "Okay, okay, I've got the file now so do with it what you will."

"That easily?" Sirius stared at him stunned. Regulus laughed and shook his head.

"Umm, no. But if I try to explain the amazing complexity of what I did, your minds will explode. So, we'll leave it at that, okay?" Regulus thought for a moment. "I also got a lot of base code from Kreacher, so that's why it didn't take me a week."

"Kreacher?" Sirius asked, sounding overwhelmed. "What?"

Regulus shrugged. "He's someone I met on the Dark Web. Helps me with code and shit. He's been working on like facial recognition stuff for a while. He'll be happy to hear that it worked." Regulus swiveled to stare at them and was thrown backward when Lily rushed forward to hug him. He laughed, stunned, and Lily pulled back and kissed him on the cheek. Regulus blushed, lips pulling upward in an awkward smile.

"You're brilliant, Reggie," Lily gushed. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you*. And tell Kreacher thanks too."

Regulus smiled bashfully and nodded, looking over at Severus. "I was happy to help. Seriously. Um, have you guys thought about how you're going to actually blackmail Riddle?" Severus pursed his lips and shook his head. Regulus exhaled, "Yeah, okay. We can use this program I have so that if law enforcement tries to track it or anything, they won't be able. Sounds good?"

Lily smiled brightly. "Yes, Reggie, thank you. You're the absolute best."

"Yeah, I know," Regulus joked, cheeks tinted red. Severus arched an eyebrow at him, and Regulus gave a small shake of his head. Severus figured that if he wasn't gay he would be madly in love with Lily, but that didn't necessarily mean Regulus was.

Regulus turned back to the computer and typed for a minute or two. "This looks good?" he asked, and Lily peered over his shoulder. She gestured for all of them to look, and they quickly crowded over his computer, reading over the screen.

It was a nondescript white text box with the words:

TOM RIDDLE

IF YOU DON'T GET BELLATRIX LESTRANGE AND LUCIUS MALFOY TO LEAVE
SEVERUS SNAPE AND SIRIUS BLACK ALONE, WE WILL RELEASE INFORMATION
CONCERNING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH LESTRANGE.

WE WANT NOTHING ELSE AND WILL NEVER CONTACT YOU AGAIN UNLESS
SEVERUS SNAPE OR SIRIUS BLACK ARE THREATENED BY ANY OF YOUR DEATH
EATERS.

HAVE A NICE DAY.

"Death Eaters?" James asked, glancing at them for clarification.

"That's what they call each other. I told you it's weird," Regulus sighed.

“Take it out,” Lily ordered. “They’ll know it’s you because how else would we know that?”

“Oh fuck, you’re right. Thanks, Lils.” Regulus quickly deleted the phrase and replaced it with a more neutral term. “Okay, anything else?” He looked at Severus who stared hard at the screen.

Fear, apprehension, and trepidation threatened to choke him, but surrounded by his friends, he knew he would survive whatever would come of it. If he was outed, Lily and Regulus, and now Sirius and James would have his back. He didn’t have to face the future alone, and the thought caused courage to burst through him.

His friends gave him power and strength, and Lucius Malfoy could not take that from him.

“Send it,” he said slowly and clearly, meeting Regulus’s gaze. Regulus nodded soberly, turned back to his computer, and with a click sent the message swirling into the digital cosmos.

Chapter 13

With the message sent, Regulus announced that all the hacking had famished him and that there was a small Chinese restaurant from across the street and would they want anything for takeout?

Lily exchanged a glance with James, who quickly offered that they would come along. She smiled encouragingly at Severus, and James playfully smacked Sirius's back. Finally, they were alone.

Severus couldn't meet Sirius's gaze at first, instead staring at the now dark computer screen. His reflection stared back, and he grimaced, feeling horribly awkward and nervous. He didn't know how this conversation would go, and because of that, he felt frightened.

Sirius seemed to feel the same because he didn't speak for a long moment. Only the soft whirring from the computer disturbed the room. Severus could hardly bear it. However, his actions the past week had forged a gulf between them, and Severus didn't know if it was appropriate for him to try to cross it.

Fortunately, Sirius found the courage Severus lacked, and he reached out to gently pull Severus to the bed. Severus complied, pressing his lips tightly together. His body didn't feel like his own, and he expected he would go wherever Sirius led him. To prove his point, he sat down after a small downward tug from Sirius.

They sat beside each other on the bed, still unable to speak. Severus leaned forward and clasped his hands in his lap as he stared at the carpet. He could feel Sirius's gaze on him, and he suddenly wished to reach over and kiss him. Yet, he couldn't do that. He no longer had the right after lying and hurting Sirius.

Finally, Sirius spoke. He sounded hesitant and unsure. Severus ached to touch him and comfort him.

"So," Sirius started, "Um, what are you thinking?" Severus froze and pressed his palms hard against his thighs.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, licking his lips at the sudden dryness. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Sirius laughed quietly at that and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah," he said. "Next time just tell me you're being blackmailed," he teased, and Severus glanced up at him. He had expected anger and frustration but found relief in Sirius's gray eyes. He straightened himself up and turned towards Sirius.

"I...I know. I'm sorry," he apologized softly. Sirius tried to smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"I thought," Sirius began, then broke off, twisting his mouth uncomfortably. Severus reached out to hold Sirius's hand, and for a half a second of acute fear, he thought Sirius would yank away. He didn't, though, only lacing his fingers through Severus's. Sirius shut his eyes and exhaled heavily. "I thought you, um, I knew you didn't like me very much, and I thought..."

"What is it, Padfoot?" Severus asked gently, using the nickname to reaffirm the sense of friendship that had bloomed between the two of them. Sirius's face crumpled at the name.

“Um, so yeah, I’m, I thought you really didn’t want to be with me, Sev.”

“No,” Severus said, voice unflinching, and Sirius nodded. He waited for Sirius to continue, and on one spoke for a long moment.

“Yeah, um, so I thought,” he continued with difficulty, “A lot of people think I’m, um, perfect. Yeah yeah, I know I sound arrogant.” He huffed out a laugh and continued. “But I’m really not. Perfect, I mean. You, I think you saw that.” He drew in a deep breath and paused, appearing to steady himself. He stared determinedly into his lap, so Severus couldn’t see his expression.

“I’m...I’m bipolar, right? Which is fine. There’s nothing wrong with it except I don’t really tell anyone? I don’t – well Reggie knows and James, but that’s about it. My mom told me not to. Ever. To, you know, not ruin our perfect family,” he said bitterly. Severus listened closely, and as he processed the words, he pulled gently on Sirius’s shoulders so that Sirius turned towards him. He leaned forward to press his forehead against Sirius’s and shut his eyes. Sirius inhaled sharply.

“Yeah,” Sirius persisted. “And you know about that other shit with my uncle. Um,” he paused and swallowed hard. “You saw me, Sev. At least I think you did, in a way no one else really does. And that’s why I really fell for you. You saw through my bullshit, and I’ve...I’ve needed some like that for a long time.

“So what I thought when you sent me that text was that, that was the reason. Right? You realized what I was, and you saw it as something terrible. Something you could never.... And I know, I know, but that’s what I thought. And that’s why I need you to know this now. Because if you really don’t think this is going to work, then please just tell me.” Sirius fell quiet, and his hands started to tremble. He kept his eyes closed and leaned into Severus, but Severus could sense the tension radiating off him.

Sirius’s admission crashed over him, the words shifting something deep within him. The intimacy nearly overwhelmed him, and he could barely imagine how Sirius must feel, trembling against him with his heart bare.

He knew exactly what he wanted to say. No doubt lingered in his mind. Even if the message didn’t deter Lucius or Bellatrix, he would risk it and stay with Sirius. Nothing felt more important.

“Sirius,” he whispered thickly, and Sirius’s breath caught. “I’m, I’m sorry. I panicked, and I thought I did what was best, but I was wrong. I should have never have left you. I should never have let you think-.” He cut off as he felt himself start to lose control and refocused.

“I’ve never been in love before. Or actually felt anything significant for anyone, I guess. There’s never been anyone like you. And I don’t know when I started to fall in love with you, but I did? And I...Sirius, I’ve never met anyone more beautiful. Not even in spite of seeing you but because of it.” He paused and ran a trembling hand through Sirius’s unkempt hair. “Sending that text to you was one of the worst things I’ve ever done. I wish I had never-.”

He cut off as Sirius leaned forward to kiss him, lips soft and insistent. Severus leaned back into it, tilting his head just so, and he felt love bound through his heart. He knew the words he said were the truth.

He loved Sirius Black, loved his crooked grin and perfect cheekbones. Loved his sharp sense of humor and his generosity and casual bemusement. Loved the sense of arrogance he carried around only to reveal someone far more beautiful and intimate. He loved him with every breath, every beat of his heart, and he wanted him so badly he thought he might cry.

Severus brought his hands up to cup Sirius's face, thumbs stroking over cheeks, and Sirius inhaled sharply, leaning harder into Severus. It set Severus off balance, and he fell backward, back on the bed, and then Sirius was over him, lips never leaving his and chests aligned.

Severus grabbed at the back of Sirius's head to pull him down, and the kiss increased in fervor. Severus felt very hot and heavy, his groin especially, and he had to suppress a moan as Sirius bit his bottom lip and tugged gently.

"Sirius," he gasped between kisses, fingers threading through Sirius's black hair. "I never...never want you to...stop."

The words seemed to deeply affect Sirius because he muttered out a curse and grabbed at Severus's knees to swing his legs up on the bed. Severus complied, and then Sirius lay atop of him, body heavy and radiating heat. He continued to kiss Severus, lips speaking bluntly of desire.

Severus yearned to touch Sirius, his fingers practically ached with it, and so he slipped one hand from Sirius's hair and ran it down his side. His hoodie was soft and black, and when he reached the bottom of it, Severus slipped his hand under it without thinking too much.

He splayed his fingers over the soft skin of Sirius's stomach, the muscles moving under them in a way that overwhelmed him with desire. He could just barely feel the jut of Sirius's hip, and the hint of the sharp line was maddening. He suddenly so badly wanted to feel all of him, to touch all of him with his fingers and then his mouth and taste the tremor of his muscles and lick at the heat of his skin.

The need hit him so clearly and powerfully, he gasped, and the lust felt incredibly natural but also terrifying in its intensity. He had never felt anything like this before, and it made him feel intoxicated over his hypersensitivity to every point of contact.

Sirius groaned against him and cupped Severus's face to deepen the kiss until it was two mouths moving blindly against each other in an attempt to consume the other. He tasted Sirius, ran his tongue across the sharpness of his teeth, and leaned into the wet heat. He also noted that something hard pressed into his leg, and Severus didn't know if he should tell Sirius to stop, that he wanted to go slower, that he didn't know what to do.

But then Sirius reached down to hoist Severus's leg around his hip, and their groins rubbed together, and Severus lost all cognizant thought in a white flash of pleasure.

He rubbed up into Sirius, and Sirius faltered, head falling underneath Severus's chin as he moaned. Sirius repeated the action, grinding down into Severus, and it felt like the action lit a fire in his gut that consumed everything. He realized he was hard too and that all he wanted was for Sirius to do what he had just done again and again and to never stop until Severus sobbed with pleasure.

He was about to hoarsely whisper that to Sirius when the door suddenly swung open, and he heard a voice exclaim: "Oh, fuck no!"

Sirius jolted upwards, a guilty smile already on his face. Severus rested on his elbows to stare at a very disgruntled Regulus. He flushed and bit his lip in embarrassment.

Regulus grimaced. "Sorry, as much we want you guys to get together, you are *not* fucking in my bed, okay?"

"Sorry, little brother," Sirius said, trying to sound more composed and apologetic than he looked. Regulus pulled a face and threw a fortune cookie at him.

“Just come downstairs, okay? And god, Sirius, you have a perfectly good bed,” Regulus said, grimacing again. “Now I just have to go bleach my eyes out.” Sirius laughed and smiled cheekily at him. Regulus flipped him off and left.

“Fuck,” Sirius said breathlessly. “You sure you’ve never done this before?”

Severus nodded and could only imagine how red his cheeks were. Sirius looked at him in disbelief, shook his head, and then leaned down to kiss him one more time.

“Unfortunately, Reggie is right, and I do have a perfectly good bed. So to be continued?” Sirius asked, grimacing.

“To be continued,” Severus responded thickly. Sirius begrudgingly got off of him, and Severus smarted at the absence. His skin still felt far too sensitive, and he lay there a few moments to gather his breath and cool the fire in his stomach.

Sirius smirked. “He never said anything about the floor.”

Severus reached over to grab a pillow and throw it in the direction of Sirius’s voice. Sirius laughed, the sound one of the most beautiful Severus had ever heard. “Or maybe not?” he corrected, and Severus’s scowl answered him.

Feeling as composed as possible, Severus stood and smoothed out his shirt. Sirius regarded him with a lopsided smile. He looked flustered and red, and Severus felt another spike of heat to his groin when he realized he was the cause. Maybe the floor actually wouldn’t be so bad?

“Come on,” Severus finally managed to say, “Or else your brother’s going to kill us.”

Sirius huffed out a laugh and then reached over to grab Severus’s hand, bringing it to his mouth to press a kiss against the back of it. Severus tilted his head and smiled.

“Just so you know,” Severus said slowly, meeting Sirius’s gray eyes. “I’m not leaving you again. Not even if they try to blackmail me or whatnot. That means you’re going to be stuck with me,” he ended lightly, trying to disguise his nerves behind amusement.

However, there was no point to the nerves because Sirius’s smile lit up his entire face, crinkling the skin around his eyes.

“I can think of worst things,” he teased and winked for good measure. Severus rolled his eyes, and Sirius kissed him once more before they listened to Regulus and headed downstairs.

Lily dropped her egg roll when she saw them, James choked on some fried rice, and Regulus rolled his eyes, but their expressions made everything worth it.

+++++

Bellatrix tried to call Sirius multiple times, but Sirius, on Lily’s advice, never picked up. She eventually stopped, and the text she sent was vile and venomous, but nothing came of it. Cleary, Tom Riddle’s influence deterred her from trying anything else.

Lucius only sent one quick, clean text stating that it was over. Severus read the text with enormous relief and a deep-seated sense of victory.

James and Sirius talked to Peter, and the argument was long and bloody and devolved into one over Peter’s adherence to Riddle’s dogma. The friendship between them began to sputter and die.

Severus felt terrible over it, but Sirius assured him otherwise. If Peter was a true friend, this would have never created an issue. And if he wouldn't be a true friend, then Sirius felt no sorrow in losing him. Severus felt it was more complicated than that, but Sirius remained insistent, and he eventually let it go.

That meant every run-in with Pettigrew was painfully awkward and tense, but Severus did his best to ignore it and treat Pettigrew with reserved politeness. He hoped that Pettigrew would eventually come around, but he wasn't holding his breath over it.

Remus, on the other hand, was elated. He smacked himself in the face when he realized how much of an idiot he had been, winced over his dare, but overall seemed ready to officiate their wedding.

Sirius joked that Remus was more into their relationship than they actually were, but Remus grinned and shook his head.

"Nah, mate. It's just nice to have you dating someone who's good for you. You used to be 100% of a dick but with Sev, he's brought you down to maybe 80%, 75%? I consider that a fantastic success. And if I'm into that, then sue me."

It took Sirius a beat too long to flip Remus over, and Severus exchanged a grateful look with him. And then Remus asked if they were going to name their first kid after him, and Sirius said they would never condemn a child to something like that. Remus flipped him off, and they were all laughing and everything felt right.

James, too, had regarded their relationship with a deep sense of relief and joy. One night, he, a little too drunk for his own good, explained to Severus that Sirius had spent all of New York moping around over him until James finally cracked and said if Sirius wouldn't tell him, he would. And when he didn't, jeez, you should have seen him, almost annoyingly artistic in his heartbreak, like some fucking forlorn Oscar Wilde.

Then James, his voice dropping an octave, talked about how Sirius spent the weeks after the fateful truth or dare night self-destructing. How he took up with Bellatrix again, even though James couldn't stand her. How he stopped going to class, never left his room, and how much he had changed since talking with Severus. How much more he truly smiled than even before all of this.

Severus had given a small smile, tucking his head downward. The glow in his chest threatened to shine out from his chest as a beacon that proclaimed his love.

Lily seemed beyond happy. Every mention of Sirius brought a smile to her face, and she would randomly lean over and kiss him on the cheek, explaining that she was just simply so happy for him.

Severus blushed at that and felt again that deep sense of gratitude and love for someone as wonderful and kind as Lily Evans.

Regulus was the best of all. He scavenged his house for embarrassing childhood photos of Sirius and sent them all to Severus. Sirius was less than pleased, but Severus found it hysterical and thanked Regulus profusely.

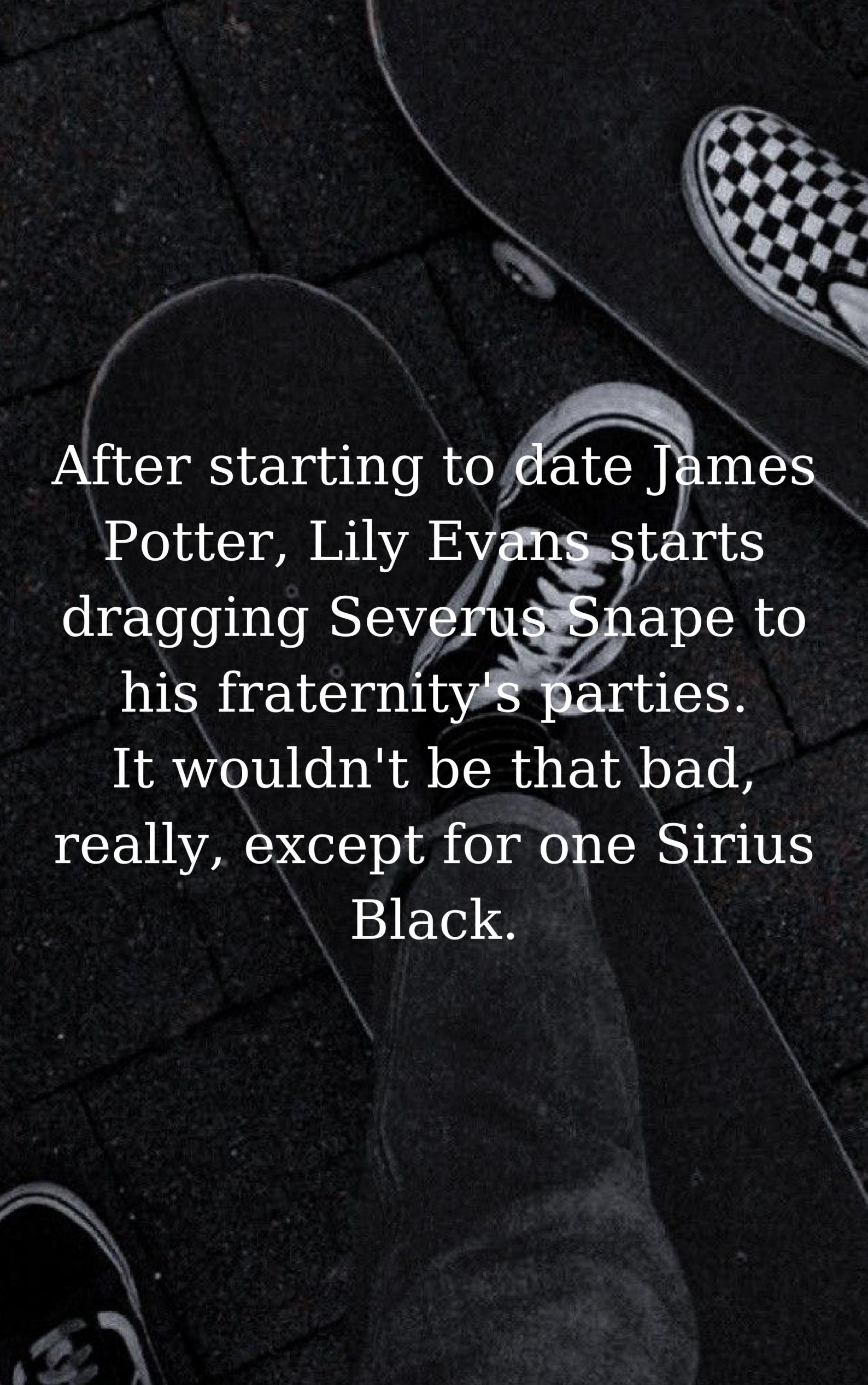
After their initial setback, Sirius and Severus recommitted to their relationships so fiercely that it stole his breath.

As first loves go, it was difficult for Severus not to feel as if he had found his soulmate. Sirius was everything and more, and he loved him with a deep ache in his soul.

From Sirius, all he felt was love. A claiming, overwhelming love that stripped them down to their truest selves.

For Severus, he could imagine nothing more beautiful.

Fin.



After starting to date James
Potter, Lily Evans starts
dragging Severus Snape to
his fraternity's parties.
It wouldn't be that bad,
really, except for one Sirius
Black.